

**TRANSCENDING THE SOCIAL: THE ILLUSIONS
OF POSTMODERN INDIVIDUALISM IN THREE
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS**

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with love

to

*Mom, Dad,
Sissy & Simi*



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled “**Transcending the Social: The Illusions of Postmodern Individualism in Three Contemporary Indian English Novels**” which is being submitted by **Sumeet Varghese** for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy is his original work, and it has not been submitted previously for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCING INDIVIDUALISM

Any study of individualism is incomplete without an engagement with the word's semantic history, its social, political, economic, cultural and philosophical forebears, and its present bearings. To do all that here however, would be a tedious task and moreover besides the point. Howsoever, some linkages will have to be drawn, if only to show how postmodern individualism, is in some senses, a continuation and modification of the tenets and principles of modern individualism. This introductory chapter then proposes to sketch a brief schematic history of individualism, by providing some preliminary understanding of it. The relevance of this term is explored in the Indian context since it is the immediate background for the texts under study. Finally, an overview of the mode of analysis employed to read the texts is given.

Generally, any standard definition of individualism, at least of the dictionary variety, lists qualities like “self-centred” feeling or conduct, “free” and “independent” “individual” action or thought and “egoism” as characteristic of individualism.¹ What this catalogue-like enumeration fails to inform the reader is the fact that it is possible to look at individualism more as an idea, an attitude or a doctrine than a psychological trait. Moreover, what is also not made evident is the idea that any definition of individualism is based either on a tacit acceptance of the individual-social antithesis or a denial of it.² Besides, depending on a psychological listing of traits is also a venture ridden with problems. For according to Ian Watt :

Many psychological definitions of the term “individualism” equate it with egoism, with a single individual's inward independence of other people or institutions; and in this case it would surely be difficult to deny the appellation “individualist” to the Athenian Socrates, for example, or to

China's Mao Tse-Tung. But individualism was not originally or primarily a psychological term; it was and is essentially a social description; if people are aware of being individualists, it must be because the concept is familiar and established in their society.³ (emphasis original)

It is important to keep this perspective in mind because many a definition of individualism relies more on a psychological appraisal than a sociological description.

Individualism has not only had different meanings in different countries but in different periods too. Many of these, though, have merged. Interestingly, the word itself, happens to be of 19th c. origin.⁴ But lineages earlier than that have been claimed. For instance, Jacob Burckhardt in his classic study *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, maintains that the notion of the individual has its origins in Renaissance Italy. Before the Renaissance, he says, man was "conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation - only through some general category."⁵ That disappeared when "man became a spiritual individual, and recognised himself as such."⁶ This position however, has been debated by later scholars. For instance, according to Raymond Williams :

The emergence of notions of individuality, in the modern sense, can be related to the break-up of the medieval social, economic and religious order. In the general movement against feudalism there was a new stress on man's personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society⁷.

Louis Dumont, interestingly, saw Christianity as having contributed to the institutionalisation of individualism. According to him, Christianity created a new social form - a fraternity of believers in Christ, in which every individual was a moral

autonomous entity equal to the other.⁸ Thus, cumulatively speaking, it may be said that the rise of Christianity, changes in the medieval world order and the Renaissance may have contributed, in some measure to the modern sense of the individual and consequently, the meaning of individualism. But apart from the Renaissance and the Reformation, there were a few ideologues too, who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, significantly championed the individualist cause. Chief of these, was of course, Descartes, who with his “*cogito ergo sum*” (not “*cogitamus ergo sumus*”) provided the individual with a method to trust only that knowledge which the individual himself or herself could be sure of, without any doubt.⁹ Later, John Locke too started with the individual as the basis of his psychological, political, and epistemological thought.¹⁰ Much of Enlightenment thought is indebted to him. Two other important precursors of individualist ideas in the Romantic period are Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Rousseau for one, purported the idea that the individual is naturally good and is corrupted by society. Goethe, on the other hand, dwelt at length on the problems of the individual self, especially in his long novel *Wilhelm Meister*.¹¹ In more ways than one then, these important ancestors, created a general pool of ideas about the individual and individuality, from which the word individualism derived and still derives its sustenance.

Individualism, in Steven Lukes’ brilliant study *Individualism*, has had several conceptual careers in France, Germany, America and England. If in France, the “French form *individualisme* grew out of the general European reaction to the French Revolution and to its alleged source, the thought of the Enlightenment,”¹² then the German *Individualismus* developed from the “romantic idea of ‘individuality’ (*Individualität*), the notion of individual uniqueness, originality, self-realization - what the Romantics called *Eigentümlichkeit* - in contrast to the rational, universal and uniform standards of the

Enlightenment, which they saw as ‘quantitative’, ‘abstract’ and therefore sterile.”¹³ As a consequence, while the word acquired a pejorative colour in France, in Germany it sounded a positive note. On the one hand, it began to be accused of isolationism and social disorder, while on the other, it was seen as a means of greater self-fulfillment and essential for the organic unity of the individual and society. In America and in England, it suffered further changes in meaning. Whereas, in the former, it came to “celebrate Capitalism and liberal democracy,”¹⁴ in the latter it served “as an epithet for nonconformity in religion, for the sterling qualities of self-reliant Englishmen, especially among the nineteenth century middle classes, and for features common to the various strands of English liberalism.”¹⁵ In America, then, individualism stood for equal individual rights, limited government interference, a *laissez-faire* approach to trade, natural justice and equal opportunity not to mention, some form of social Darwinism.

Though the contextualisation of individualism in nation-specific terms is important, to understand the history of its reception at a national level, it would not be unfair to maintain that today or in the present, individualism is a highly hybrid entity - the hybridisation having been promoted by an interpenetration between its various context-specific meanings, courtesy changed global realities. Accordingly individualism may be read as signifying a core cluster of merged meanings or principles. These are *the supreme and intrinsic value, or dignity, of the individual human being* - a moral principle, the notion of *autonomy, or self-direction*, the idea of *privacy*, a belief in *self-development*, and an abstract conception of the individual.¹⁶ Attached to these of course, are certain ways of looking at the political, the economic, the religious, the ethical, the epistemological and the methodological.¹⁷ Thus, if an individual were to view government as created and maintained by his or her consent or as representing individual interests or as working towards pursuing and satisfying his needs and desires, then he or

she maybe thought of as practicing political individualism. Accordingly, Economic and religious individualism may be construed of respectively as a belief in economic liberty and in the freedom to practice religion without the help of intermediaries. Ethical individualism implies a perception of the nature of morality as essentially individual. In fact, this would also mean that the individual is the very source of morality, of moral values and principles and even the sole, supreme arbiter of moral issues. Epistemological individualism may be understood as a philosophical doctrine that affirms that the source of knowledge lies within the individual. Methodological individualism is taken to be a theory of individualism which purports that all analysis of social phenomena must be, in the final analysis, couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals. Needless to add, various philosophical systems, economists, political and social theorists have done more than their bit to enrich this line of individualism - thinking. Now while it is difficult to cite the various complex traditions from which these have sprung, it may be safely assumed that, on the whole, they have been allied with, if not belonged to, liberal traditions.

It is easy to see, even for a novice of postmodernism, how the various ideas, doctrines and beliefs of individualism discussed so far, have a relevance far greater than they may have had, in the postmodern era, considering the fact that this era has been typically characterised by a remarkable celebration of the individual. For as Zygmunt Bauman says, in the postmodern era, “the liberty of the individual is the overriding value, the criterion in terms of which all social rules and regulations are assessed.”¹⁸ Perhaps, the philosophical champions of postmodernism demonstrate this truth in more than ample measure. Take for instance Jean-François Lyotard, who in his seminal *The postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, makes the suggestion that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and

cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”¹⁹ This era, he then argues, is marked by the demise of *grandes histoires* or an “incredulity toward metanarratives”²⁰ and the emergence of *petites histoires* or ‘micronarratives’ in their place. In other words, if Lyotard is to be believed, ambitious ‘total explanations’ are bunkum. Instead of working for and under some grand delusion, Lyotard here almost suggests, it is better to turn to small-scale single-issue preoccupations like saving sea-turtles or opposing the construction of a flyover on ecological and environmental grounds. Now this kind of an argument very subtly undermines social modes of knowledge, at least those that are comprehensively constructed, while it privileges contingent, local (read ‘individual’) knowledges. It is this kind of an ideological climate that fosters and valorizes ‘marginal’ versions of knowledge.²¹ Thus a Bhabha, may with perfect élan, glorify the position of the ‘marginal’ for a redefinition of the nation-space,²² while almost in the same vein a Jameson may come up with an axiom to read every ‘Third World’ text as a national allegory.²³ Incidentally, all the three texts considered in this study have sometime or the other been read as representative of larger social realities. Rushdie’s parodic interpretation of history has been read as a community’s history or as the history of the subcontinent albeit a subjugated one. Arundhati Roy’s book was praised by the Booker Committee Chairperson, Gillian Beer herself, for providing a history of South India! Now this is not to suggest that all these positions have necessarily evolved from Lyotard in monolithic fashion. It is just that various kinds of skepticisms have arrived on the scene and their interpellation in the arch-discourse of postmodernism have lent them a hybridity, no doubt, but an underlying similarity as well. Hence a Lyotard may be seen as contributing to a Jameson, though of course, the two may be ideologically poles apart.

If Lyotard may be accused of following an epistemological individualism, then Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari may be dubbed out and out individualists with a

weakness for psychologism. In their *Anti -Oedipus*, they argue with convincing rhetoric for a revolutionary and radically subversive assessment of desire. According to them, society has always acted as a vigilante to desire and therefore it has repressed and controlled it, relegated it to demarcated areas and delimited structures. “To code desire is the business of the socius,” they maintain.²⁴ Accordingly they champion the liberation of the body and desire. Taking a slightly different view of this desire business, Bauman concurs that, “in the time of postmodernity, regulation of desire turns from an irritating necessity into an assault against individual freedom.”²⁵ This of course, results in a sacrificing of security. The fallouts of this brand of postmodern individualism then are bizarre, not to mention strange. To quote Bauman again :

Postmodernity...lives in a state of permanent pressure towards dismantling of all collective interference into individual fate towards deregulation and privatization. It tends to fortify itself therefore against those who - following its inherent tendency to disengagement, indifference and free-for-all - threaten to expose the suicidal potential of the strategy by pushing it's implementation to the logical extreme. The most obnoxious 'impunity' of the postmodern version of purity is not revolutionaries, but those who either disregard the law or take the law into their own hands - muggers, robbers, car-thieves and shoplifters, as well as their 'alter egos' - the vigilantes and the terrorists.²⁶ (emphasis original)

These “flawed consumers”, as Bauman calls them, expose the problems at the heart of the postmodern project, and thereby the dangers attendant upon a postmodern individualism.

An examination of other key theorists of postmodernism will undoubtedly reveal a similar ambivalence within their individualist ventures. However, all that is not really

relevant to the task of explicating the structure and nature of postmodern individualism in the three texts undertaken for the study. As stated earlier, postmodern individualism is a continuation of modern individualism with certain departures and omissions. For what unites many a postmodern theorist is the anti-Enlightenment drive and individualism is steeped both in Enlightenment thought and anti-Enlightenment reactions. A more pertinent issue here would be to consider individualism in the Indian context. Now, whereas an early study like Louis Dumont's *Essays on Individualism : Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*,²⁷ locates individualism as a phenomenon of the western world, a more recent study like André Bêteille's *Society and Politics in India : Essays in a Comparative Perspective*²⁸ argues that the notion of the individual was not alien to Hindu philosophical traditions and that therefore notions of the individual and the principles of individualism, chiefly believed to be western importations, only drew on those continuities or discontinuities that have been a characteristic feature of such traditions. However, that debate notwithstanding, it has been accepted that the individualism found in the post-colonial context, in an acculturated society is a residue chiefly of western education, Christian influences and western capitalism, the quotients may differ from one form to another. Yogendra Singh, stressing the western influence part through colonialism, suggests that it was a result of modernisation since "various forms of legal innovations were introduced by the British which were in contradistinction with the traditional Hindu law, and were based on the principles of universalism, rationalism and individualism."²⁹ This then is the genesis of individualism in India and it informs all three texts considered.

Postmodernism has been variously linked to Capitalism, by a host of theorists like Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Alex Callinicos and Aijaz Ahmad, to name a few.³⁰ Interestingly, individualism too, has an intimate link with capitalism. Karl Marx, for

instance had claimed, quite early on, that Individualism is a “bourgeois philosophy” which serves to conceal the social character which production always manifests.³¹ Even Durkheim had maintained that the ‘cult of the individual’ is the counterpart to the individualisation produced by the expansion of the division of the labour and is the main moral support on which it rests.³² The growth of individualism, he had felt, was the inevitable concomitant of the division of labour. This relation, between individualism and postmodernism made explicit in the light of the above positions, should help understand the contexts in which postmodernism and individualism are undergirded by the structures of capitalism. While it is not easy to suggest that postmodernism speaks the same language everywhere, considering the fact that the uneven global development of capitalism is what separates various countries of the world into various worlds, it is perhaps possible to surmise that metropolitan locations around the world have a cultural ambience which makes them seem similar. The texts that have been picked up share postmodernism’s global cultural ambience. But ideologically, they purport differing kinds of individualism. Though, of course, they share postmodernism’s favourite hobby horses, their individualism does not suffer the self-deconstruction which is symptomatic of overtly postmodern texts. However they all do, through a variety of gestures, identify with “the enfeebled social and philosophical theses of ‘postmodernism’”, to quote Samir Amin, “which teach us to be happy and to cope with the system on a day-to-day basis, while closing our eyes to the more gigantic catastrophes which it is cooking up for us” and thus legitimise “the manipulative practices required of political managers for whom democracy must be reduced to the status of a ‘low intensity’ activity.”³³

A brief description of the various chapters herein will indicate the direction, nature and method of the study undertaken. The first chapter attempts to explain Rushdie’s obsession with history in *Midnight’s Children* through the use of an

individualism-alienation dialectic. What underpins Saleem's feverish historicising is a sense of alienation - an alienation from the social. Accordingly, his individualism is directed towards a fervent historicism, in a bid to overcome the social alienation. This I have argued is a doomed project because his monomaniacal rewriting of history precludes any belief in social modes of knowledge. By according himself a centrality in the writing, he is seemingly led by the illusion that the social is not important.

The second chapter undertakes an examination of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* by tracing its critique of the nation-state mechanism. While this critique - an articulation of Ghosh's individualism, is subversive in certain ways, it is also found wanting in that it effectively fails at examining the very structures in which it is located. Perhaps the novel too falls for the illusion that the narrator espouses - a genuine desire for the 'other', that is somehow supposed to blur the borderlines between class, race, gender and nation.

The third chapter is basically an attempt at appraising the individual-society dilemma in terms of the social-individual conflict, private rebellions and solutions offered. By far the most critical of the three, *The God of Small Things* almost propogates a revolutionary kind of individualism albeit tipped with a postmodern penchant for the small, the local and ultimately, the individual in obvious contradiction to the social. However it is not this false dichotomy that undermines Roy's project; it is the romantic escape-hatch that she seizes upon that betrays the illusory nature of her enterprise. These then, to sum up, are the various kinds of illusions that postmodern individualism falls prey to.

END NOTES

¹ The *Chambers Concise Dictionary*, 1992 ed. defines it as "individual character" and "independent action as opposed to co-operation", while the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 1974 ed. gives "feeling or behaviour of a person who puts his own private interests first" and "egoism" as likely meanings.

- ² See *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of political thought*, ed. by David Miller (Oxford, U. K. : Basil Blackwell, 1987) 239-41.
- ³ Ian Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism : Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe* (Cambridge, U. S. A. : Cambridge University Press, 1996) 235.
- ⁴ See especially Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, U. K. : Basil Blackwell, 1973); *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia* and Ian Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism*.
- ⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (Vienna, London: Phaidon Press, 1937) 70.
- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; London: Fontana-Harper Collins, 1988) 163.
- ⁸ See his *Essays on Individualism : Modern Ideology in Anthropological perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986)
- ⁹ Ian Watt, *op. cit.*, 237.
- ¹⁰ See Crawford B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism : Hobbes to Locke*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962)
- ¹¹ Ian Watt, *op. cit.*, 237-238.
- ¹² Steven Lukes, *op. cit.*, 3.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, 17-18.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 32.
- ¹⁶ See Steven Lukes, *op. cit.*, 45-78.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 79-122.
- ¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (U. K. : Polity Press, Blackwell, 1997) 3.
- ¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1984) 3.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, xxiv.
- ²¹ This is not to belittle in any obnoxious manner those knowledge systems and 'subaltern histories' that are derived from an experience of structures of oppression, exploitation and subjugation.
- ²² See especially, Homi Bhabha, "Dissemination : Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in his *The Location of Culture* (London, New York : Routledge, 1994) 139-70.
- ²³ See Ahmad's "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'," in Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory : Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1992) 95-122.
- ²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London : Athlone Press, 1984) 139.
- ²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *op. cit.*, 4.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, 16.
- ²⁷ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism : Modern Ideology in Anthropological perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986)
- ²⁸ André Béteille, *Society and Politics in India : Essays in a Comparative Perspective* (New Delhi: O. U. P., 1991) 270.
- ²⁹ Yogendra Singh, *Modernisation of Indian Tradition : A systematic Study of Social Change* (Jaipur : Rawat Publications, 1986) 96.
- ³⁰ See, Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New Delhi: O. U. P., 1992).
- ³¹ T. B. Bottomore, *Karl Marx : Early Writings* (New York: Polity Press, 1964) 147.
- ³² Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Glencoe, New York: The Free Press, 1964) 399-402.
- ³³ Samir Amin, *Spectres of Capitalism : A Critique of Current Intellectual Fashions* (Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 1999) 9.

CHAPTER - I

HANDCUFFED TO HISTORY: INDIVIDUALISM, ALIENATION AND HISTORY IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHTS CHILDREN*

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* problematizes and interrogates certain conventional notions of 'History' and 'Historiography' effectively deploying the category of the 'individual' to attack them. This chapter will first examine the manner in which this is achieved and then go on to argue that such efforts are underpinned in this particular context by an 'individualism--alienation' dialectic. Finally, it will try to relate these issues to the larger discourse of postmodernism so as to expose the text's ideological concurrence with that discourse, specially with regard to ideas about 'individualism' and 'history'.

History and historiography have been variously defined by historians, historiographers and philosophers alike, for them to acquire at any given point in time, a fixed, stable and conventional set of meanings. All the same, given the nature of the debates regarding these concepts today, it must be assumed that for many people, some basic and 'essential' notions about history and historiography have always persisted. In the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, J. H. Hexter in an entry on historiography called "The Rhetoric of History," chooses to define it as "the craft of writing history and/or the yield of such writing considered in its rhetorical aspect."¹ Hexter also goes on to suggest that the term history, by which he means the systematic study of the past in a disciplinary manner, must not be understood as referring to the past as such.² This is an important clarification because very often the institutional, disciplinary status of History is confused with the set of events that history as a system of

inquiry studies. Having stated that, it is possible to now view history and historiography as two facets of the same coin. Both are, in the end, 'textual' attempts at recovering, reconstructing and writing down an 'event' or a group of 'events'. In other words, history and historiography may be called epistemological tools used for grasping the ontological nature of experience. All forms of history then aim at the communication of some knowledge through the use of language or more appropriately, historiography. This of course, presupposes that language can uncomplicatedly and lucidly communicate past experience. In fact, for a whole generation of historians, the only worthwhile points to debate about with regard to the use of language in history were perhaps, the ones that considered its rhetorical aspects. Thus, the denotative and connotative functions of language came in for special scrutiny, important as they were, it was assumed, for efficient and effective communication. Besides, since all historical accounts had to be primarily accessible, coherent and sequential statements along with evocative language, if possible, were prescribed as normative for the advancement of historical knowledge. Moreover, the principle of coherence in historiography, dictated the use of narrative to achieve the most common mode of historical explanation. This obviously was the most important distinguishing factor that set apart the rhetoric of history from the rhetoric of science. Consequently, the quality of the rhetoric used by historians came to be measured largely in terms of the success with which it conveyed historical understanding. No one has ever censured a scientist for not being lucid enough. All this is not to suggest that historians and historiographers believed language to be neutral. It is worthwhile to note what Patrick Gardiner states in this matter. For he voices an all too common suspicion of language among historians, when he says that since the very language used is that of

evaluation and appraisal, there can be no objective or value-free historical account.³ Language then, was suspect in historiography but the suspicion perhaps was not strong enough to destabilise history.

History -- the discipline, as traditionally understood, is essentially a 'reconstruction' from 'within'. Therefore, it is not just the 'what' but the 'how' of an event too that a historian grapples with in creating a coherent, explanatory model. To put it differently, not just narratability but historical analysis also must go hand in hand, if anything like 'meaning' is to be generated out of an idiosyncratic *mélange* of occurrences, incidents and accidents that constitute the past under study. It is important to note here that this 'past' in history is almost always 'indirectly confronted' by the historian. In other words, documents and archaeological records serve as mediators between the past and the present. The historian may of course vicariously participate in an event of the past and using his/her everyday experience, in tandem with available 'evidence', piece together the "reasons, purposes, and emotions that motivated the persons with whom he is concerned and that found outward expression in their deeds".⁴ J. H. Hexter, in this context, says that the difference between indirect participation and face-to-face confrontation is only a matter of mode, not of quality, coherence, intensity, depth and completeness and that therefore it is a form of explanation which is sometime indispensable.⁵ But participation direct or indirect cannot in anyway obliterate the foundational nature of records in history. Since these have generally been understood as the purveyors of some knowable 'truth' about the past, the authenticity or validity of any historical claim rests solidly on them. Besides, conventionally speaking, since the actual practice of history-writing starts some removes from the past, a stern fidelity to available

historical records is naturally presupposed as the only means of verifying any rough historical hypotheses. Moreover, these prove to be the only extrinsic standard to judge a historical work as against fiction which has its own intrinsic standards. Finally, any account of history inevitably uses some form of causality of determinism. Every set of events has an antecedent set of factors or causes which in the discourse of history are seen as contributing or leading to it in some, if not inevitable manner. Of course, implicit here is the assumption that such factors or causes are ascertainable for it is just *that* belief that makes history possible. As E. H. Carr says, "History, like everyday life, would be impossible if this assumption were not made."⁶ Moreover, from among the welter of causes, a historian is generally compelled to pick up an ultimate cause, the cause of all causes, by ordering them hierarchically, while providing the historical explanation for an event.⁷

It is possible for historians, depending on their perspective, to provide a historical description of an event or events either by deploying the category of the 'individual' or the category of the 'collective'. The idea here is not to view the individual in isolation from the social or the collective but to explain social happenings in terms of individual experiences. In the disciplines of history and the social sciences, this is a valid mode of enquiry and is called the principle of methodological individualism. Opposed to holism, this principle asserts that "'ultimate' or 'final' explanation of the more 'significant' social phenomena must be given in terms of at least 'typical' dispositions (including beliefs, attitudes, and volitions) of anonymous individuals involved."⁸ (emphasis original). When read a little differently, the above stated axiom is probably seen to imply that the individual element in history or the micro aspect of that discourse can be used effectively

to explain an occurrence that is not limited to just the individual and which is therefore, a macroscopic entity. But whatever the claims of such a model of explication be, it cannot provide a comprehensive overview only with the help of the 'individual' dimension. A lot of history, it has been believed all too often, is concerned only with individuals. A natural outcome of the fact perhaps, (if it were to be assumed,) that the writer of history is also an individual. Consequently, (courtesy such apprehensions or misapprehensions,) history comes to be seen as a domain of the individual. Thus written by individuals, history is viewed as being only about individuals and as probably meant only for the individual. E. H. Carr calls this "the common sense view of history." He further notes that:

This view was certainly taken and encouraged by nineteenth-century liberal historians, and is not in substance incorrect. But it now seems over simplified and inadequate, and we need to probe deeper. The knowledge of the historian is not his exclusive individual possession: men, probably, of many generations and of many different countries have participated in accumulating it. The men whose actions the historian studies were not isolated individuals acting in a vacuum: they acted in the context, and under the impulse, of a past society.⁹

The above quote subtly hints at the problems which crop up when the 'individual' dimension is exaggerated. Carr's insistence for a communitarian base or ethic with regard to the historian's knowledge is matched by his emphasis to read individual actors in history as part of a social stage. Plainly, the objective here is to make history objective and not subjective. And the individual clearly is for Carr and a great many historians of his ilk, the obverse of objectivity, coherence, order and even historical community.

Consequently, it is at the level of the individual, that history becomes potentially threatened with subversion, deconstruction and an aporia that not only pluralises history but also destroys it 'eventually'.¹⁰

Midnight's children, in the light of the above discussions, almost appears as an introduction into the processes of history-writing i.e. historiography and an analysis of the manner in which history sets itself up as a discourse. The past -- both immediate and remote has always maintained an attraction for history and fiction alike. And this was so even before disciplinary boundaries were drawn up between the two.¹¹ Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* delves into two 'pasts' -- that of an individual and that of a nation, only to show that both are inextricably intertwined and to argue thereby perhaps, that a history or historiography which does not take cognizance of that fact is doomed to make a serious and heinous compromise with truth. It is to prove this point then that the central protagonist of the novel and its narrator Saleem Sinai, is presented as a quasi-historiographer and a quasi-historian, self-reflexively probing the nature of historical documentation almost to the point of dismissing it. The opening line on the opening page of the novel itself, clearly indicates Saleem's preoccupation with history -- the discourse:

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's nursing home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters too. Well then: at night. No, its important to be more...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.¹² (p. 9).

The above passage amply demonstrates Saleem performing the twin tasks of documenting and reflecting on that process simultaneously. It also shows how any history is bound to betray a marked obsession for factual desires on closer analysis, and that it is Saleem's awareness of this fact that results in the shift from a fairy tale like beginning to a seeming historical narrative replete with chronological, geographical and historical details. Thus, right at the outset, Saleem makes known the terms of his engagement with the past. Speaking the languages of not just history or fiction, but many discourses his narrative sets out to record that which has happened in a variety of modes. Meenakshi Mukherjee, with reference to the same passage, notes that it "sets up three levels of narration" -- fairy tale, autobiography and history, and that "the interplay among the generic conventions of each mode is sustained throughout the three parts and thirty chapters of the novel."¹³ Inevitably, this gesture effectively reduces the status of history to that of one among many discourses and consequently, suggests that there may be more than one method of recreating the past. For the past -- both public and private, is material meant also for history and to claim then, that that past is knowable in ways never known to history is to seriously question the discipline of history. However, the problematisation and critique of history is not only effected through different narrative techniques and different methods of perception but through the idea of the individual as well. And it is that aspect that the subsequent sections will take up.

Looked at superficially, the entire novel may seem to deal with the life and times of one individual and his family, with large chunks of national history here and there. But the novel is not just a story about the Sinai family and their migrations from Kashmir to Agra to Delhi to Bombay to Karachi to Dhaka and finally, back to Bombay once again,

over three generations, but also the history of a nation or a subcontinent from the Jallianwalla Bagh to the Emergency, from 1915 to 1978. All the momentous events of Indian history have a direct and unmitigated impact on the Sinai family and that impact is registered and recorded by Saleem only to give a new interpretation to them. The individual's personal experience of historical events, in other words, becomes a very important site for redefining them. And it is just this aspect that Saleem stresses when he says:

...thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. (p. 9).

Saleem's coincidental birth on the occasion of India's independence naturally entitled him, the passage implies, to experience the history of his country in a special way. This connection with national history is further strengthened through the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to baby Saleem stating that: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own." (p. 122). And mirror it does in strange metaphorical ways and literal ways. Reflecting on the ways in which he is connected to history, Saleem observes:

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and

passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of dualistically--combined configurations of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hypens are necessary: actively--literally, passively--metaphorically, actively--metaphorically and passively--literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (p. 238). (emphasis original)

Throughout the novel, events of national or international importance are shown to have their resonances symbolic or otherwise in day-to-day events of local importance. For instance, Saleem's grandmother, Naseem develops all kinds of illnesses in her Srinagar house, just when the First World War is moving from one crisis to another. Saleem's grandfather, Aziz, her would be husband attends to her just as he would a war. The ordeal ends only when the World War ends. Dieter Riemenschneider, commenting upon this aspect says:

In Rushdie's book there is virtually no event which is not given an individual as well as an historical meaning. To cite only a few: Saleem's grandparents, on their way from Kashmir to Agra, stop over in Amristar, where Aziz experiences the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre and on the same day realises how different his wife is from what he imagined her to be -- orthodox, family--centred and strong-willed; Saleem's parents marry on the day in 1945 when the first atom bomb is being exploded to destroy thousands and usher in the nuclear age;...¹⁴

The list is exhaustive but the point it is making is that history avoids a crucial principle of simultaneity when dealing with historical events. Saleem by placing a private episode

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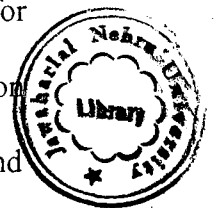
against a national or international episode points to a kind of correspondence that can only be called mythical. For in some cases, the important historical event does not perform any function of causality and yet the personal episode is shown to have some chaotic connection with that event. To quote Reimenschneider again:

Saleem's method of combining the individually subjective with the supra-individually objective, i.e. the family history with that of the subcontinent, is prompted by the disposition of the Indian mind to see correspondence in seemingly unrelated events:...

Saleem himself, makes such a claim when he considers the optimism disease which has spread among the masses courtesy the Chinese invasion:

As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form -- or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens...when the Indian flag was first raised for instance, a rainbow appeared above that Delhi field, a rainbow of saffron and green; and we felt blessed. Born amidst correspondence, I have found it continuing to hound me... (p. 300).

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Saleem's awareness of public sentiments vis-à-vis crucial historical events implicitly shows him subscribing to a vision of history that is individual and humanistic in its aims and methods. V. Rangan observes this aspect when he comments:

History is at once temporal and timeless; its temporality consists in the

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facts that are chronicled in it, but its values are timeless.

...Then history becomes a myth. What renders such a history significant is not the chronological and sequential study of events, but an imaginative portrayal of men and matters, political and historical so as to view history in the larger perspective of human history rather than in the limited focus of a nation's chapter. In that way history is mythicised by Rushdie which naturally results in taking liberties with chronology.¹⁶

Thus, Saleem's or the individual's perception of history is based on coincidences and bizarre correspondences, a metaphorical as well as literal appreciation of historical events and a complex simultaneity when it comes to narrating historical episodes in the light of individual affairs. In short, a di-scientification of the processes of writing and perception that have been too rigidly followed by historians and historiographers.

Saleem's major attempts at destabilising history and historiography are done by attacking traditional notions of causality and the seeming objectivity of the historian's subjectivity. Thus at various junctures, Saleem talks of himself as having played a major causal role in determining national events. For instance, there is an episode which shows him being directly responsible for triggering off the violence that ended with the partition of the state of Maharashtra. (p. 192). Again there is the irrational suggestion that he was responsible in some mysterious way for the death of Jawaharlal Nehru -- the father of the nation. (p. 297). What is more, he even suggests that the "hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of" his "benighted family from the face of the earth." (p. 338). The 1971 war with Pakistan too, according to Saleem, was conducted in order to reunite him with his old friends. (p. 337). Whereas,

“the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a state of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight.” (p.427). Thus in Saleem’s view there is a complex causal link existing between national accidents and the individual Saleem. On the face of it, the arguments that claim causal centrality for Saleem and his family, may sound absurd and ‘untrue’. For instance, Saleem's having provided the language marchers with their provocative anti-Gujarati slogan in no way, makes him crucially responsible for the language riots and the subsequent division of the state of Bombay along linguistic lines. Similarly, nor can his family's annihilation in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, be understood as the sole purpose of the war. However, on closer inspection, these very statements can be seen as asserting the individualised sides of history. For in the episode of the language riots, Rushdie is probably hinting at the possible role of individual whims and fancies as causal factors in the determination of events having wide-ranging social implications. It is also meant to be a parody perhaps of the kind of causality, historians assiduously and meticulously follow. E. H. Carr in an observation that can have ramifications for Saleem's fanciful notions of causality in history, has this to say about such a theory of history:

This is the theory, that history is, by and large, a chapter of accidents, a series of events determined by chance coincidences, and attributable only to the most causal causes. The result of the Battle of Actium was due not to the sort of causes commonly postulated by historians, but to Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra. When Bajazet was deterred by an attack of gout from marching into central Europe, ...when king Alexander of Greece died in the autumn of 1920 from the bite of a pet monkey, this

accident touched off a train of events...These so-called accidents in history represent a sequence of cause and effect interrupting -- and, so to speak, clashing with -- the sequence which the historian is primarily concerned to investigate.¹⁷

Thus, Saleem's understanding of historical events makes him look at them from 'his' perspective and that of 'his' family. The Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was responsible for the deaths of the members of not just one family but several families and it is that human casualty which Saleem's personal history highlights and turns into a causality. But even when that sense is not conveyed, Saleem's conflicting descriptions of an historical event manages to, to use Carr's terms, "interrupt" and "clash" with official versions of history. Moreover, there are other ways in which he achieves this. Consider the following lines, an 'insider's' view almost on the events that immediately predated the 1965 war:

The war in the Rann lasted until July 1. That much is fact; but everything else lies concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-believe which affected all goings-on in those days, and especially all events in the phantasmagoric Rann...so that the story I am going to tell, which is substantially that told by my cousin Zafar, which is as likely to be true as anything; as anythin that is to say, except what we were officially told. (p. 335).

Here official, state--sponsored views are articulately challenged by the individual, unrecorded experiences of Zafar, Saleem's cousin. While talking about the emergency, to cite another example, Saleem uses his secret awareness of private details regarding that event to destabilise any firm ideas about it:

...the Emergency, too, had a white part -- public, visible, documented, a matter for historians -- and a black part which, being secret, macabre untold, must be a matter for us. (p. 421).

It is this deeply personal, voyeuristic manner of looking at public events that makes Rukmini Bhaya Nair call Saleem's history, "gossip". But this is not to take the bite off those kinds of accounts. For according to her:

Gossip, an underrated, conversational medium for private criticism was,...transgressively utilised by Rushdie as a devastating literary weapon against the claims of historical 'truth' and religious 'morality'.¹⁸ (emphasis original)

She also goes on to suggest how this rumour and gossip history can function as a "discourse from below," capitalising on a fund of knowledge shared only by the marginalised, and eventually produce an alternate and subaltern version of history, challenging the certainty of the official version. But rumour and gossip apart, the entire exercise of debunking history that Saleem undertakes, on and off, smacks of certain parodic intentions. Meenakshi Mukherjee in referring to an article by David Lipscomb suggests that the article shows how *Midnight's Children* contains large scale interpolations from "a standard history book by a western scholar" -- Stanley Wolpert's *The New History of India* (1977) published around the time when Rusdhie was writing his novel. She further notes that:

These extracts -- blandly imparting information or 'objectively' presenting official facts and figures -- stand out so starkly amidst the ethos of imaginative excess in the novel, that a discriminating reader can

instinctively pick them out as jarring interruptions in the narrative,...¹⁹

(emphasis original)

Looked at, a little differently, this same interpolation may be called Saleem's individual way of cocking a snook at official history. Neil Ten Kortenaar, in an article called "Midnight's Children and the Allegory of History," seems to be suggesting just this view when he says:

History as found in textbooks such as Wolpert's adopts a neutral, objective voice that claims to eschew metaphor altogether. But the objective and the seemingly literal rely on dead metaphors, whose metaphorical nature goes unnoticed. It is these metaphors that the allegory playfully makes literal.²⁰

In short, the very language of history is subverted to create a reality that takes its form from language. Left to himself, the historian cum historiographer, Saleem, uses the powers of language to create a history parodying official history, and in the process incorporates the local and the individual into something supra-local and supra-individual.

Saleem's railings against history have never the objective stamp and sanction of an unfeeling, disinterested historiographer. In fact, the whole agenda behind creating a serious distrust of history -- official or otherwise, is also that of gravely questioning the seeming objectivity of the historian and the historiographer and to bring in, however subtly, the subjective, feeling individual into the discourse of history and historiography. This is achieved by placing at the centre of the novel a protagonist who writes about not just the various experiences he has undergone but about the experience he is undergoing while doing that. Meenakshi Mukherjee calls this "a double movement in time" which at first, recounts the various events -- both public and private and then "starts the writing

and traces the first movement."²¹ Hence Saleem's story is not just a story about his individual life but the story of his writing too. In what Dhar calls "the dramatization of his encounter with history,"²² Saleem in a truly self-reflexive fashion shows how:

- historical importance is a function of the space given to a particular event or individual in the writing of history. Thus, he feels he has given more than due space to his alter ego Shiva. (p. 410).
- individual contingencies like work pressure, sickness and so on can make any form of historical reconstruction unreliable. The personal traits of the historian influences the writing of a seemingly 'impersonal' history and "the risk of unreliability grows." (p. 270).
- cohesion between disparate materials of a history text and coherence is brought about by putting things in a proper rhetorical fashion and most importantly, in Saleem's view i.e., "what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe."(pp. 270-271).
- the processes dealing with the preservation of the past - what Saleem calls the "chutnification of history," are bound to suffer all kinds of distortions and therefore the historian is obliged to live "with the shadows of imperfection." (p. 459).
- lies as well as truths can have an equally strong influence on the historian who is not discerning enough for "since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred." (p. 443).

- the demands of propriety can sometimes stop the most frank historian dead in his/her tracks. Caught between the protocols of propriety and crude frankness, Saleem discovers that family history has its appropriate “dietary laws” that instruct the historian “to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood.” (p. 59).
- the indeterminate and incomplete nature of past knowledge can only be partially overcome and that too with the help of guess work and speculation since “most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence” and so everything depends on the “trick of filling in the gaps.” (p. 19).
- the at times, self-righteous arrogance of the historian can empower him/her to highlight or soft-pedal historical excesses and accordingly call any mistake or error, minor and minute. Hence, when Saleem realizes that the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in his history is chronologically wrong, he justifies it with perfect nonchalance by first suggesting that “a little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances” and then by saying “in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.” It’s his final argument though, that clinches the deal for him: “Does one error invalidate the entire fabric?” (p. 166).
- the wholeness of historical perception is a myth that is meant to cover up for inherent human weaknesses. History is therefore, a matter of rearranging various episodes for the purposes of achieving some selfish

interest or gain. Saleem demonstrates this logic aptly when “in the secrecy of a bathroom,” he glues his anonymous note meant for Commander Sabarmati from various paper clippings -- his “first attempt at rearranging history -- on to a sheet of paper.” (p. 260.)

- every history invariably and naturally presupposes the suppression of various other histories. Saleem’s story is only one story for he “has been a swallower of lives” and therefore has “many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane!” (p. 9).
- Subjectivity of perception, understanding and analysis is inevitable when considering historical events close at hand.
- meaning and shape are bestowed upon a text of history by the historian. Saleem’s “desperate need for meaning,” brings home the fact that he’s “prepared to distort everything to re-write the whole history” of his times solely to place himself in a central role. (p. 166).
- individual memory plays a major role in determining an historical reality. Saleem confesses that his truth is only “memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies and nulifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogenous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts, someone else's version more than his own.” (p. 211).
- reality, by its very nature, is a highly ambiguous experience with

equally ambiguous modes of narrating it. For Saleem, "reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems -- but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible." And so when the perceiving subject closes in on the perceived object, "the illusion dissolves -- or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality." (p. 166). Moreover, sometimes "legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts." (p. 47).

Saleem's systematic denunciation of history and historiography are undertaken then, under the aegis of an individualism that uncompromisingly reads itself into every act and thought that the discourse of history addresses. And nowhere is this more emblematically shown than in the various reflections and comments on history and historiography, cited above. A point to note here is that Saleem's personal relations with Padma, the listener/reader or the 'interlocutoress' as Dhar calls her,²³ affect his historicising to the extent that the very idea of hermetic insularity and an individual dispassionate objectivity that have been commonly understood as the historian's necessary trademarks become problematic. And so this too can be seen as a strong attempt along with the others, to constitute history along individualistic, personalistic lines. In short, *Midnight's Children* poses some of the most classic problems besieging history and historiography today, by enlisting the services of the concept of the individual. It is important therefore, to consider the ideological underpinnings of such a project so as to understand why perhaps such a critique works and primarily, to know why it is launched in the first place.

In his introduction to *Learning to Curse: Essays in Modern Culture*, Stephen J. Greenblatt makes the following observation on "identity" and "selfhood" as experienced through story-telling:

My earliest recollections of "having an identity" or "being a self" are bound up with story-telling - narrating my own life or having it narrated for me by my mother. I suppose that I usually used the personal pronoun "I" in telling my own stories and that my mother used my name, but the heart of the initial experience of selfhood lay in the stories, not in the unequivocal, unmediated possession of an identity. Indeed the stories need not have been directly about me for me to experience them as an expression of my identity...²⁴ (emphasis original)

For Saleem Sinai also -- the storyteller or the historian, stories or histories make up a very important ingredient of his life. And so, something from the above cited passage probably holds true for Saleem too. But then, is Saleem's obsession with history only a means of tracing his identity? Isn't it also, to some extent, an articulate attempt to assert his individualism over and against history's alienating effects? For no matter how variegated and multiple the senses in which the term is invoked, history is broadly understood as a power, a force which controls Saleem's life from the moment he is born. And it is in that spirit that the phrase "handcuffed to history" (p. 9) is employed on the opening page. This obviously has an affinity with a Marxist conception of alienation. According to Erich Fromm:

Alienation (or 'estrangement') means, for Marx, that man does 'not' experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that

the world (nature, others and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object.²⁵

(emphasis original)

Saleem experiences his world “buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below” (p. 37), not actively but passively. And yet, despite being “a person *to whom things have been done*,” - a “perennial victim” in his own words, he “persists in seeing himself as protagonist” (p. 237) of his unfolding history.

Saleem’s own admission and his position in the world he occupies, suggest emphatically Saleem’s alienation from the world of action. In fact, this whole project of writing his story, is a retrospective gesture, a flashback launched in hindsight, motivated largely by the peripheral (read ‘alienated’) position that he has come to occupy:

Hindsight comes to me now, too late, now that I am finally consigned to the peripheries of history, now that the connections between my life and the nation’s have broken for good and all... (p. 395).

Since history, more or less understood, as a collection of past episodes of mammoth significance by Saleem, has passed him by, he decides to write himself into it. This he carefully calls his “lust for centrality.” (p. 356). But there are other purposes also which are roped in to justify the writing. Thus sometimes, it is the son who is sought to explain Saleem’s ‘historical turn’:

My son will understand. As much as for any living being, I’m telling my story for him, so that afterwards, when I’ve lost my struggle against

cracks, he will know. Morality, judgement, character... it all starts with memory...and I am keeping carbons. (p. 211).

On other occasions, the reasons range from those like setting an example for other historians:

It is possible, even probable, that I am only the first historian to write the story of my undeniably exceptional life-and-times. Those who follow in my footsteps will, however, inevitably come to this present work, this source book, this Hadith or Purana or *Grundrisse* for guidance and inspiration. (p. 295).

to that of leaving behind an authentic, truthful account of things:

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (p. 461).

And yet, many a times, a historical consciousness is seen as imperative for the purposes of achieving an integrated perspective of oneself. Towards the end of his rambling history, Saleem wonders:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come... I repeat for the last time: to understand me,

you'll have to swallow a world. (p. 383).

Such a deterministic account of himself partly justifies Saleem's turn to history, but not his individual urge to impose himself on that history. And though consciousness, "the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now," (p. 35) Saleem's entry into history can only be seen as a desperate attempt at asserting a kind of bourgeois individualism and not as an effort to integrate the individual self into a larger social order or reality. Saleem himself confesses at one stage how his individualism has been constantly at threat from the teeming masses:

If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance... perhaps if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one might make oneself grotesque. (p. 109).

Elsewhere he says:

Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the state and myself transmuted. in 'the madam's' mind, into that in-those-days-famous phrase: 'India is Indira and Indira is India?' Were we competitors for centrality -- was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own -- ...? (p. 420). (emphasis original)

This is an instance of the individual perceiving himself as not just an isolated entity divorced from the social but also an example of that individual visualising the social as subordinate to him. Alienation here, is seen to engender a kind of individualism that can only be inimical for any conceptualisation of the social vis-à-vis the individual. And this is what is precisely meant by an individualism--alienation dialectic. Both need not be

seen as mutually opposing but as mutually engendering. The dialectic works very strongly in Saleem's case. From the middle class confines of a Methwold's Estate, Saleem falls into a Bombay slum dwelling totally alienated from his class origins, perhaps even alienated from the people he works with and loves, and discovers in the discourse of history, a means of regaining his lost individualism. It is important to note here that Saleem faces not just alienation but historical alienation -- the alienation produced by the discourse of history, too. While it is difficult for him to overcome his social alienation, it is possible to create a parallel discourse to history and see himself as an inalienable part of that discourse. Here 'alienation' can be taken to mean 'externalisation' or 'estrangement'. Saleem's history is written with the tacit awareness that there are many histories which do not include him. For instance, national history and official history do not have references to him or his family. And so he's alienated from them. This is not to suggest that Saleem's entire effort is to right the wrong done to him by history. His is in fact a double-edged approach: show, first and foremost, how official history suppresses other histories. This subaltern gesture at least has the desired result of giving some credibility to his voice. Secondly, bring in a skepticism of all forms of history. This postmodern gesture surely has the much sought effect of equating all kinds of histories, in one single blow.

Richard Cronin in a scathing attack on the protagonist Saleem observes:

Saleem is an outsider, a 'little princeling', a 'young nawab', a 'lord', but it is because he is an outsider that India seems one to him, so that he can aspire to encapsulate the whole of it. His English language at once separates him irrevocably from India, and makes the whole of India available to him, just

as the exclusive hill on which Saleem lives isolates him from Bombay, but at the same time transforms the city into a panorama spread before him, at his feet.²⁶ (emphasis original)

What this passage hints at is the separateness that characterises Saleem's location and location. Though not in any way, a representative of the subaltern school of history, he cleverly appropriates the voices of the dispossessed and the oppressed or suppressed to register his own private²⁷ individual protest. In fact, the whole purpose of his socio-cultural transfer -- from Estate to humble slum dwelling, can be seen as a means to authenticate his voice. And that is what makes his iconoclasm suspect. Rukun Advani talking of Rushdie's fiction notes:

Irreverence, iconoclasm, and witty forms of subversion in relation to institutionalised fossilised and dominant forms of thought and power characterise his fiction.²⁸

The problem here is the unknowability of the dominant forms of thought or power. For the kind of skepticism that Rushdie practices, at least in *Midnight's Children*, seems to downgrade all forms of thought or power, be they dominant or not. And only the individual voice seems to reign over the chaos it creates. Justifying the right of the individual novelist to contest official versions of whatever, in a manner not unlike Saleem's, Rushdie self-flatteringly remarks:

Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians' version of truth.²⁹

While there may be some truth in this statement, it is questionable whether this truth

holds true for a novel like *Midnight's Children*, where a fashionable “crisis of meaning” is too suicidally entertained for any meaning to have validity at all.³⁰ Though of course, paradoxically, ‘meaning’ is the driving force behind Saleem's grand historic project:

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning --
yes, meaning -- something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. (p.
9).

Also, what jeopardises the project of writing a history 'from below' here partly, is the dependence on the aesthetic styles of postmodernism, which seriously suspect all efforts aimed at communicating meaning. Dhar however, takes a contradictory view and argues that there is an ethical standpoint which informs the novel, a kind of political statement implicit in the debunking of history. He says that:

The logic of selection and the distribution of space between events is dictated by the downward slant he (Saleem) perceives in India's march towards the building of a secular democracy.³¹

This Dhar calls a 'critique'. But then this critique is largely restricted to an event like the Emergency. Fed on a heavy diet of individualism, Saleem cannot visualise, a state where individual liberties are suspended. So, the Emergency becomes a kind of watershed in Indian history precisely because it stands for crass totalitarianism and the absolute denial of individualism. Thus Saleem's perception of Indian history and its various events are largely shaped by his individualism. What becomes clear therefore is that the text glorifies a kind of individualism which is hand glove with a postmodernist debunking of history produces a liberal humanist position that may speak for the downtrodden even as it makes demands for its own preservation and continuation. There is no better word for

this form of individualism than 'bourgeois individualism'. Because in Saleem's case, it is located in his middle class origins. Inevitably, it is this temper that informs his historicising.

To conclude, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* raises a lot of questions about history and historiography, as it is commonly understood. Through the character of Saleem Sinai, he makes several forays into the history of the subcontinent and the discipline of history, to critique the former and to problematise the latter. The efforts of a Saleem, however, in this particular context, are constantly underpinned by an alienation--individualism dialectic. This makes Saleem's deconstruction of history a simultaneous result of the alienation he suffers and the individualism he musters to overcome it. Finally, the text's dependence on the larger discourse of postmodernism to bring about its interrogation of the discourse of history renders problematic any possibility of producing an effective polemic. This may be one of the important trouble spots that the novel encounters. But the more important problem is with the idea of individualism that the novel engenders. For it is the individual without any possible hope of reconciliation with the social or the historical that the novel projects. These then are the handcuffs that the novel never manages to break off.

END NOTES

¹ J. H. Hexter, "The Rhetoric of History," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968 ed.

² *ibid.*

³ Patrick Gardiner, "The Philosophy of History," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1969 ed.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ J. H. Hexter, *op. cit.*

⁶ E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, ed. R. W. Davies, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1990) 95.

⁷ *ibid.*, 89-90.

- ⁸ W. H. Dray, "Holism and Individualism in History and Social Science," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed.
- ⁹ E. H. Carr, op. cit., 35.
- ¹⁰ I use the word 'eventually' here to suggest not just the usual sense - 'finally', but also the less invoked one - 'of or pertaining to an event'.
- ¹¹ See T. N. Dhar, *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel* (New Delhi: Prestige, 1999), especially Chapter 1. "Towards an Understanding of History-Fiction Nexus" (pp.9-36), and Chapter 2. "History-Fiction Conspectus in Time" (pp.37-81), for an excellent 'history' of the History-Fiction encounter, their institutionalized separation and mutual interpenetration, both in the West and in India.
- ¹² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, Picador ed. (1981; London: Pan Books, 1982). All references to the text are indicated by page numbers in parenthesis.
- ¹³ Meenakshi Mukherjee, Introduction, *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. M. Mukherjee (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) 19-20.
- ¹⁴ Dieter Reimenschneider, "History and the Individual in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," in *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, ed. Viney Kirpal (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990) 192.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 189.
- ¹⁶ V. Rangan, Foreword, *Salman Rushdie's Fiction: A Study*, by M. Madhusudhana Rao (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992) vii-viii.
- ¹⁷ E. H. Carr, op. cit., 98-99.
- ¹⁸ Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "History as Gossip in *Midnight's Children*," in *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) 50.
- ¹⁹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, op. cit., 17.
- ²⁰ Neil Ten Kortenaar, "*Midnight's Children* and the Allegory of History," in *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) 30.
- ²¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, op. cit., 16.
- ²² T. N. Dhar, op. cit., 162.
- ²³ *ibid.*, 167.
- ²⁴ Stephen J. Greenblatt, Introduction, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Modern Culture*, by S. J. Greenblatt (New York: Routledge, 1992) 6.
- ²⁵ Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1961) 44. For a comprehensive view of Marx's concept of 'alienation', see specially, Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
- ²⁶ Richard Cronin, *Imagining India* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 4-5.
- ²⁷ The word 'private' ironically, also means 'deprive'. Saleem's 'private' history may therefore be quite possibly read as an exercise in 'depriving' rather than an attempt at endowing or enriching history.
- ²⁸ Rukun Advani, "Novelists in Residence," *Seminar* 384 (1991): 16.
- ²⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books; New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 14.
- ³⁰ See Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible: or the Perils of Reclassification," in *The Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narrative, Colonial English*, by K. Sangari (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999) 1-28. She calls Saleem's postmodern project "the specific perspectivism of a bourgeois subject." (p. 24).
- ³¹ T. N. Dhar, op. cit., 191.

CHAPTER - II

SHADOW-BOXING THE STATE: THE POLITICS AND THEATRICALS OF INDIVIDUALISM IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* espouses, in no small measure, an interrogation and critique of the concept of the nation-state from the standpoint of the individual. To that extent, the novel challenges the concept both at its abstract ideational level and at its practical manifest level. To put it differently, the nation-state is examined as a political philosophy and as a concrete politico-socio-economic reality in the world today. However, this debunking, it should be noted, is not without its concomitant problematics. This chapter is devoted to an analysis of the manner in which the above-mentioned critique is conducted and further to revealing its co-optation by a post-modern logic. Since, Ghosh's case-study, if it can be called that, is to a large extent, based on the political realities of the Indian subcontinent, it is imperative to consider the notions of the state vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state. Accordingly, this chapter progresses by delineating first, the varied discourses on the nation-state and then discussing the ramifications in the Indian context.

If there is any one characteristic peculiar to the concept of the state, then it is 'statelessness'. For a highly variegated and multigamous set of definitions, ideas and conceptions have come to cluster around this one enigmatic unit of political thought. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, it is important that some relevant definitions and ideas be entertained. This expedient measure, no doubt, may seem to be of an opportunist kind. But all the same it will have achieved perhaps, the task of keeping the discussion within the purview of this study. So then how, keeping this limited scope in mind, can the state be understood? One method would be to enumerate the various

general characteristics that are found to be common to a great many notions of the state.

These, accordingly are listed as under :

- It is primarily a community of people.
- It has a well-defined territory, free of external control.
- It is the embodiment of the collective will of the people.
- It is organised for a political end.
- It has sole monopoly over force.
- It exercises sovereignty and control over persons and things within its boundary.
- It's an abstraction and the government is it's most concrete form.
- It is a set of institutions and processes.
- It is a matrix of relationships.
- It demands total allegiance from all its citizens.
- It is responsible for the preservation of social order.
- It overshadows society.

All the above points, collectively taken, point out the four elements indispensable for the creation of any state, viz. population, territory, government and sovereignty. But, these to say the least, suggest an ideal, if not real nature of the state. For ideally speaking, the state should be a manifestation of the common collective will and it should have for it's ends, such political aims as the promotion of a socially just and equitable life and the realization of common purposes. However, there is a great gulf dividing the 'should be's' from the 'is's', when it comes to matters regarding the state. Besides, to talk in terms of 'ends' would have the unwarranted result of dragging the subject into "the realm of moral

philosophy, far removed from the real world of politics.”¹ Moreover, it would also entail taking a particular political perspective on the state.² Nevertheless, this should not restrain us from making an honest and negative assessment of the state, if there are sufficient grounds to do so. Fortunately, a whole bunch of political scientists and theorists from Plato to Held, whatever their political loyalties, have outlined the negative nature of the state.³ These relate to the use of physical force, power and coercion. Thus Weber, attempting a sociological definition of the state, not in terms of ‘ends’, suggests that:

Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific *means*, peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force.⁴ (italics original)

He further adds that it “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”⁵ R. M. MacIver and C. H. Page, writing in a similar vein, have distinguished the state from all other associations by “it’s exclusive investment with the final power of coercion.”⁶ Some other theorists have also hinted at the possibility of the state damaging not just the social fabric but the individual also courtesy the power vested in it. MacIver, for the instance, says that, the state :

...regulates the outstanding external relationships of men in society. It supports or exploits, curbs or liberates, fulfils or even destroys the social life over which it is invested with control.⁷

And Harold J. Laski in his *A Grammar of Politics* has commented that:

whereas all other associations are voluntary in character, and can bind the individual only as he chooses membership of them, once he is a resident of some given state, legally he has no choice but to obey it’s commands.⁸

These statements, to say the least, only attest the potentially harmful and paradoxical nature of the state. This power of the state, is moreover, given further cogency and legitimacy when it subsumes the principle of 'nation' and 'nationalism'. For it is through the interlocking and intermeshing of these structures that individual and social freedom are compromised. An analysis of this admixture, therefore, will provide a meaningful context for understanding the critiques implicit in *The Shadow Lines*.

Ernest Gellner in his *Nations and Nationalism* contends that :

nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.⁹

and further that nationalism emerges when the existence of the state "is already very much taken for granted."¹⁰ This suggests that nationalism is an ideology for state control. For in its attempts to legitimize itself, the state has to confer a unitary identity upon its citizens. According to Giddens, nationalism is a crucial force for fostering such an identity, for it is "the cultural sensibility of sovereignty."¹¹ Thus his classic definition of a nation-state is :

a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries, its rule being sanctioned by law and direct control of the means of violence.¹²

It is the emotional force of nationalism that allows, Giddens seems to be saying, the acceptability of the nation-state in this form. Michael Billig supports this notion of nationalism and goes on to say that it is nationalism which makes "this boundedness and monopolisation of violence seem natural to 'us', who inhabit the world of nation-states."¹³ He further states that 'nation' can have two related meanings : 'nation' as the

nation-state, and 'nation' as the people living within the state. And so by a very common ideological principle, any nation - as - people are inevitably linked with a nation - as - state. In this way, he concludes :

nationalism involves the construction of the sense of national identity for those who are said to inhabit, or deserve to inhabit, their own nation-state.

However, nationalism involves more than the construction of a particular identity (a particular national 'us'), for it includes the general principle: it is right that 'we' possess our own state, because peoples (nations) should have their states (nations).¹⁴ (emphasis original)

The nation, it must be noted here, is a distinguishable entity from the state. And though, like a political unit, it is a collection of people bound together by nationalist sentiments, it is largely constructed as a cultural and psychological concept. Apart from geographical, linguistic and religious unity, an identity in matters of collective pride, humiliation, pleasure and regret over a common set of historical events, is generally deemed necessary for the emergence of a nation. And while it has it's antecedents in kinship ties or blood relations - a feature of all tribal communities, a nation may also grow to encompass various races and cultures different from each other. This transition from a narrow parochial social unit to a supposedly plural, multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural body of people is carried out, in many cases, under the twin pressures of anticolonial nationalism and the drive to attain independent statehood. To put it differently, nations and states converge since nations are only abstractions or as Benedict Anderson puts it, "imagined communities" not "objective communities."¹⁵ Aijaz Ahmad calls this convergence a characteristic of capitalism when he says :

when we speak of these nations we are referring not so much to some set of supposedly permanent and primordial facts of ethnicity or language or race or religion, or of some idealized spiritual ethos. We refer, rather, as we must, to the mundane world of territorial boundaries, armies, markets, systems of taxation and governance, bodies of legislation, artefacts of ideology, facts and rights of residence, and so forth. That is to say: force, legality, hegemony. In other words, it is a characteristic of the capitalist era that nations and states tend to converge; that a nation is either created by or finds its material form of existence in a state; and that consolidated nations arise only where a coherent power bloc is able simultaneously, to fashion a nationalist and populist ideology as the principle of its own legitimation, as well as to construct a state that fixes the boundaries of what eventually becomes a nation.¹⁶

Hence, what are presently called nation-states have a complex genealogy, in that they are forged out of the competing, clashing and colluding forces of the 'nation', 'nationalism', and the 'state'.

Though the Indian nation-state rose out of a collective struggle called anticolonial nationalism, its nationalist venture was already rife with many contradictions, by the time of independence. This was because a secular nationalist movement was largely challenged by a Hindu and Muslim nationalist agenda.¹⁷ Partition ensued and nationalism always remained a permanently problematic issue. Today, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, the ambivalence at the heart of the nationalist project has been amply demonstrated. Moreover, the constant presence of two neighbouring nation-states and

their respective nationalisms, initially derived from a pre-independence Muslim nationalism, makes the Indian nation-state all the more pressurised to flash its secular nationalist credentials. This situation becomes especially acute during times of communal disharmony. The class question is also very important to the dilemmas faced in the prevailing context. For according to Aijaz Ahmed :

India obtained a fully consolidated capitalist class during the colonial period itself, large fractions of which participated in the anticolonial movement, and which emerged as 'the' ruling class after Independence;...¹⁸ (emphasis original)

It's anybody's guess as to what the composition of this class is like. Needless to add, the modern Indian nation-state has come to inherit a destabilising and destructive set of problems related to 'nationalism' , 'nationness' and 'statehood'. And it is these set of problems that *The Shadow Lines* engages with in a very individualistic manner. For Ghosh's individuals, in various ways, subvert and challenge received notions apart from exposing the shadowy nature of the state's realities.

From out of the many individuals peopling the narrative, it is possible to pick up three, as they share a special kind of emphasis that marks them out from various other characters. Moreover, in their special relationships with each other, they illustrate a structural logic in that their various positions on the nation-state and nationalism are brought out in terms of a set of convergences and divergences over these issues with respect to each other.¹⁹ These characters then, are Ila, the anonymous narrator - her cousin, and the narrator's grandmother. Largely revolving around two families - one Indian, the other British, the story straddles not just continents, but also a web of

relationships that develops between the two families and the individuals within them. Besides, apart from being a narration in the first person, the story takes on the form of a *bildungsroman* as it goes on to give a detailed account of the growth of a young boy from his birth in Calcutta in 1952 to his return from London - an adult young man, in the 1980s. The actual span of the story however, includes a period prior to the narrator's birth - much prior that is, to the birth of a nation-state called India. For the narrator's grandmother and her sister, Mayadebi - Ila's grandmother, belonged to a Dhaka of the 20's . This fact, it must be said, enunciates by it's very subversive status, a meditation on the problems of the nation-state at various points in the novel. And moreover, it is this problematic that underpins the various affiliations and associations between Ila, the narrator and the grandmother. All this will be amply demonstrated in the chapter. For the present, the relevance of some of the other characters to the individuals under consideration can be understood. Accordingly, Tridib - Ila's immediate uncle, May - Mrs. Price's daughter, Robi - Tridib's younger brother, and Nick - May's brother, can be shown to deserve special mention. Tridib greatly influences the the narrator because as the narrator himself puts it, Tridib had given him "worlds to travel in" and "eyes to see them with."²⁰ His eccentric and enigmatic life style serves as a convenient standard for the narrator to analyse his own upbringing. It is his tragic death however, at the hands of a violent mob in Dhaka in 1964 that becomes the catastrophic point in the novel and which eventually leads the narrator to examine the rationale behind the creation and maintenance of nation- states. Robi and Nick, in comparison, play peripheral roles. Robi is only slightly older to the narrator and almost grows along side the narrator. He ends up as an I. A. S. officer while the narrator is shown as pursuing his Ph. D. Nick Price - Ila's

idealised lover initially and later husband, becomes for the narrator someone to compete against to win the love of Ila. His sister May, an active supporter of many humanitarian causes, enters into a strong love relationship with Tridib and towards the end of the novel establishes a bond with the narrator. It is she who finally helps the narrator unravel the mystery of Tridib's death. Now, it may be suggested here that the matrix of connections and linkages between the various individuals and the various lines of influence that undergrid their respective patterns of growth and development, partially hinted at in the description above, may be seen symbolically as an attempt to delimit the geo-cultural indoctrinations of a specific nation-state. In other words, through the medium of cross-cultural encounter, the text tries to break free from the particular psychological, political, ideological and cultural specificities that individuals growing up in one nation-state are supposed to subscribe to.

There are a constellation of concepts all related to the individual which are taken up in the text to examine critically the nature and functions of the nation-state. The first of these is 'imagination'. Interestingly, this particular facet may seem to have been explored in the novel, in the light of the Andersonian position, almost deliberately to showcase how individuals may not necessarily imagine about their specific communities but about 'others' as well. Both the virtues as well as the dangers of this imagination business are also spelt out. Thus in the opening section of the novel, the narrator's ideal Tridib is shown to have an encyclopedic memory and imagination :

... he would begin to hold forth on all kinds of subjects - Mesopotamian stellae, East European Jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about.

(pp. 8 -9).

The narrator himself admits that Tridib wanted to teach him to use his “imagination with precision”. (p. 24) Here then is a qualitative injunction on the uses of the imagination. That seems an imperative for the narrator to ward off the charge of dreaming or fantasising. The narrator accordingly invokes a standard in Tridib’s use of the imagination to contrast the uses to which grandmother and Ila subject it. Ila for instance, despite all her globe-trotting, remembers a place only by the position of the Ladies’ on the airports. This, in some ways, is certainly a failure of the imagination for the narrator. For as he distinctly puts it :

I had a glimpse at that moment, of those names on the map as they appeared to her : a world wide string of departure lounges, but not for that reason, at all similar, but on the contrary, each of them strikingly different, distinctively individual, each with its Ladies hidden away in some yet more unexpected corner of the hall, each with its own peculiarity...I imagined her alighting on these day-dream names - Addis Ababa, Algiers, Brisbane - and running around the airport to look for the Ladies, not because she wanted to go, but because these were the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood. (p. 20)

Grandmother too, falls in line with Ila, when it comes to imagining Burma, a place she lived in for twelve years. Notice how, the narrator’s tone, when he talks about it, is just as dismissive as it was with Ila in the passage cited above:

... my grandmother spent the first twelve years of her married life in a succession of railway colonies in towns with fairy-tale names like

Moulmein and Mandalay. But later, all she remembered of them was hospitals and railway stations and Bengalee societies : to her nothing else in that enchanted pagoda-land had seemed real enough to remember. (p. 124).

This attitude to the imagination undoubtedly has its toll on the careers and the personalities of the two women. Ila, in a move opposite to that of the narrator's, begins to imagine painful, personal experiences in rosy ways. Thus, a racist attack on her, while she was in school, despite Nick's cowardly desertion, is turned into a romantic piece of fiction where Nick arrives just in time to save her from her tormentors. She ends up, a deluded individual, marrying an unfaithful Nick, who hangs on to her more for the security and comfort she and her money provide him with rather than for reasons related to genuine love. Grandmother, on the other hand, her dreams of the Dhaka house in which she grew up notwithstanding, ends up an incorrigible nationalist, indirectly sacrificing Tridib on the altar of her imagined nation. All this ultimately, of course, has its impact on the cultural locatedness of the two women. For as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes :

Unlike these male protagonists, Ila and the grandmother are 'unrooted' characters, typifying two of the characteristic forms of twentieth-century diaspora : Ila is the post-colonial cosmopolitan, while her great-aunt is - though she refuses the term - a refugee.²¹ (emphasis original)

By implication, this would suggest that both by their use or disuse of the imagination posit a different relationship with their cultural origins. The grandmother, despite the

history that had made “her place of birth to be so messily at odds with her nationality,” (p. 152) finds herself in a position affirming a nation-state to which she had migrated in the 30s. Ila, on the contrary, never a stickler when it came to such things as origins, simply decided to settle down in London perhaps because she found things -- at least, she ‘imagined’ them to be so, quite rosy there. In her imagination then, she could find no community or continuity for that matter, with the communities of the Indian nation-state. The narrator’s position vis-à-vis the two individuals considered here is that of an intermediate one. For as will be later pointed out, though he does not explicitly mention what relation his imagination has with his location, he does conduct a scathing critique of the inventions and (ir)realities that the individual imagination falls prey to, in its attempts to justify the nation-state.

This brings us to the other set of concepts - all related to the first i.e. ‘imagination’, in some manner. These respectively are ‘invention’, ‘memory’, ‘reality’ and ‘freedom’. The narrator, following the footsteps of his mentor, Tridib, accepts the value of the imagination with the knowledge that invention and memory too play a role in it. Therefore, while contrasting Ila’s reminiscences with those of Tridib’s, the narrator says :

Ila lived so intensely in the present that she would not have believed that there really were people like Tridib, who would experience the world as concretely in their imagination as she did through her senses, more so if anything, since to them those experiences were permanently available in their memories, whereas with her, when she spoke of her last lover’s legs, the words had nothing to do with an excitement stored in her senses, but

were just a string of words that she would remember while they sounded funny and then forget as completely as she had the lover and his legs. (p. 30).

However, this valuation of Ila here, is suspect because towards the end of the novel, Ila informs the narrator that she had talked in the manner cited above so that she could “shock” him and because he seemed to “expect it of her somehow”. (p. 188). Nevertheless, the contrast, even in the light of the revelation later, shows how different a purpose memory, invention and imagination serve in both individuals. Quite limitedly concerned and safe in their locations, Tridib and the narrator have the ‘luxury’ perhaps, to imagine everything from the sloping roofs of diplomat’s bungalow to the Price’s house in London. Ila, on the contrary, buffeted as much by the continents as the people she met there, has to imaginatively invent episodes, so that she may salvage for herself some sense of self-worth and dignity. This howsoever misleading but redeeming aspect of the imagination is not clearly pointed out. And Ila only serves to highlight the dangers of an over inventive imagination. Moreover, the risks involved for the others, from that situation, are also highlighted. Thus, on one occasion, when Ila asks the narrator as to why he could not take or “see the world as it is,” he informs her that it was :

...Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least, we could try to do it properly...that we had to try because the alternative wasn’t blankness - it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions. (p. 31).

What is being suggested here is that individuals like Ila and the narrator, as it is, cannot help inventing in some measure, what they see. And so they must try and attempt to do it

themselves or else they may easily take up other people's inventions. This idea has ramifications for those communal imaginings that are a part of the nation building process. As Michael Billig observes :

The reproduction of nation-states depends upon a dialectic of collective remembering and forgetting, and of imagination and unimaginative representation.²²

By showing at an individual level, then, the various virtues and vices of the imagination - an imagination where both memory and invention play an active part, the text raises serious doubts about those collective forms of the imagination which ties individuals to each other in a gullible manner. For though the narrator is taken in by Ila's descriptions or inventions of London and herself, he is able to find out for himself which is fabricated and which is real. The implication here accordingly, is that while the narrator can undertake a task of personal corroboration and authentication, a whole lot of people belonging to a particular nation-state may not be able to do so unless perhaps they desire it strongly or until they experience something which is the obverse of what they have learnt to believe in.

In an essay on the role of 'memory' in the creation and maintenance of the modern nation-state, Suvir Kaul remarks :

Memory is, above all, a restless, energetic, troubling power; the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state.²³

This notion of memory may be linked to the notion of 'reality'. For what makes people or citizens believe in nation-states, is not just memory but the reality it gives rise to in

conosance with imagination and invention. In a passage that has been more than often cited by a number of critics, the narrator - a firm believer in the 'realities' of the Indian nation-state till the death of Tridib, makes the following observation :

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me : I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance seperates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate relations was war or friendship. (pp. 218-219).

Earlier on in the novel, the grandmother too, a school teacher who eventually retired as the headmistress of a girls' high school, is shown succumbing to this (ir)reality. For before her maiden flight to Dhaka in 1964 - then the capital of East Pakistan, she had expected to see the border, which was if not "a long back line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas" then, at least "...something - trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land." (p. 151).

On being told by the narrator's father that the border wasn't on the frontier but right inside the airport, she wonders why partition and all the killings were for, if not to demarcate boundaries and set up differences. Her puzzlement only shows the extent to which she has been indoctrinated into believing the physicality or reality of the borders. Having grown up in a huge house that was partitioned because of a quarrel between her father and his brother, grandmother was naturally inclined to believe in the physicality of

partitions. Reading the partition of the Dhaka house as a confirmation of “the parallel between the family and the nation,” Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that :

The construction of a nation is a two-way process, entailing on the one hand a broad homogenisation despite seeming differences, of what lies within the boundaries and a projection of alienness upon what is situated outside.²⁴

Accordingly, grandmother arranges a rescue mission to save her long estranged uncle, when she discovers that he is still in his Dhaka home in 1964. And though she is told that after all these years he may not recognise her, she sticks to her obsession of “rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country” because she strongly believed that they were of “the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone.” (p. 129). The mission fails and grandmother ends up losing both Tridib and her uncle, not to mention a poor rickshaw-puller called Khalil, who ever since his occupation of the house had been loyally looking after the uncle. Interestingly, it was the old man, who had managed to ruffle grandmother’s set border realities. “I know everything, I understand everything,” he had said :

Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said : I don’t believe in this India - Shindia. It’s all very well, you’re going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here. (p. 215).

True to his words, the old man dies in Dhaka. But grandmother’s incurable nationalism

only gets an added boost from it. Not only that it changes it's colour.

In his *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner makes one pertinent observation. Nationalism, he says, is “a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones.”²⁵ Indian nationalism however, was denied this normative requirement and partition only accentuated the divisive hostilities between ethnic communities in the new nation-state. Accordingly, a person who grew up amidst the terrorist movements among nationalists in pre-independence Bengal, and who was reared on a heady diet of militant nationalism primarily directed against the British colonialists, had only to follow that kind of nationalism's own inherent logic, and find it naturally transferred to some other domain after partition. For as Partha Chatterjee notes, as an ideology it is in the nature of nationalism to be “irrational, narrow, hateful and destructive” and further that it is a totally European construct whose “fervent romanticism” and “political messianism” can only spell the “annihilation of freedom.”²⁶ All these ideas find their most brilliant illustration through the character of the grandmother. At a very early point in the novel, much before the death of Tridib at the hands of a riotous Muslim mob in Dhaka, grandmother echoing perhaps the Indian nation-state's policy of integrative nationalism says :

It took those people a long time to build that country; hundred of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood : with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood..... war is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget

they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi : they become a family born of the same pool of blood. (pp. 77-78).

This position is later shifted to accommodate the painful knowledge of Tridib's death. Thus, during the 1965 war, her pent-up violent nationalism takes on a very ugly turn. She not only gives away the only prized possession of her lifetime - a gold chain with a ruby pendant, but also professes to give the blood that she has drawn, by hitting the radio with her fist, to the war fund. "We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out," she tells the narrator. (p. 237). To the narrator, all of this appears simply distressing. Thinking back on Tridib's death, towards the end of the novel, he discovers that the riots that had happened in East Pakistan were triggered off by an event that took place very much within the Indian territory of Kashmir. And yet while no communal riots were reported in Kashmir or any place else, riots had broken out in Calcutta, Khulna and Dhaka within a matter of a few days from each other. This suggested not a division of experience but a singularity of culture for the two nation-states. The differences between the narrator's attitude and grandmother's attitude are made more than obvious here. Since nationalism thrives on some imagined hostility or animosity for those across the border, grandmother all too unquestioningly pursued a hate relation with those that the borders kept out. But those others were also ethnically a part of her invented country. The nation-state had unarguably messed it up for die hard nationalists like her. Sharmila Guha Majumdar sums up this dilemma aptly :

After partition - the price we are supposed to have paid for our political freedom - nationalism in the Indian context changed its meaning to exclude people on the other side of the border but could not include

everybody on this side of paradise.²⁷

The narrator, determined not to follow his grandmother's footsteps, deduces a conclusion from the event that challenges the very logic of territorial nationality. For by following the events of 1964 in a meticulous manner, he realises how the papers had almost in collusive fashion, joined hands with the state and not even hinted at the impending doom. There was mention of a Congress conference, of a possible split in the Communist party, of wars and relations but no mention of that which was to take Tridib's life. And while the respective governments bartered useless accusations, ordinary people often at the cost of their own lives saved each other. However, there was to be no Martyr's Memorials or eternal flames, because unlike soldiers they had not taken enemy lives to defend the nation's borders. Moreover, by the end of the month, the narrator notes the riots had disappeared "from the pages of newspapers," from "the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves." (p. 230). (emphasis original). The nation-state's control, it is shown, extends not just over the territory but over those realms of discourse and understanding that may be often able to resist its hegemony. Moreover, the narrator was convinced that the world over, states had drawn borders believing that by doing so they would be creating two realities - one national and the other alien. Speaking about the "special enchantment in lines" that such states demonstrate, the narrator comes round to the idea that :

...they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories, for that was the pattern of the world. They had

drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. (p. 233).

However, Tridib's death proved beyond a doubt the fact that there is an "indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments" and further that such relationships free of state mediation were the "natural enemy of government" in that they defied the monopoly of the state over its people and their relations. (p. 230).

Therefore, a place like Dhaka is more closer to Calcutta - both culturally and geographically, than Delhi is. And this is true of territories the world over, that have been riven by borders. For states to exist, it is imperative that people stop living as people and start existing as citizens. And once that happens they discover, like the narrator, an irony that national cartographers would have never imagined :

...the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four - thousand - year - old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines - so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free - our looking-glass border. (p. 233).

For a novel that sustains the notion that individual liberty must not be compromised with, it is natural that the precepts of "freedom" will be closely analysed. Accordingly, the text, in what may seem a deliberate play upon the meanings of the word

“freedom”, advocates a variety of positions on freedom through its various characters. These statements also have a bearing on the programmatic critique of the nation-state that the text conducts through a constellation of concepts that have been discussed already. To begin with, the two women characters may be considered as voicing the most aggressive articulations on freedom. Grandmother’s idea of freedom, of course, can be seen to have an ironical relation with the freedom struggle - something she has grown up with. Ila’s, on the contrary, is based on the awareness that freedom is every individual’s most essential and inalienable right. These generational differences, it must be understood, have more to do with the changed political scenario of the Indian nation-state than with such a vaguely defined thing as ‘generation gap’. For as Seema Bhaduri points out freedom must be understood in terms of the specific periods which have produced these characters.²⁸ Accordingly, grandmother’s attitude towards freedom may be traced to the pre-independence period

...when nationalism rode the world’s politics. Evolving from its denouement are the imperatives, in the younger generation i.e. in the narrator and in Robi, Tridib, and May, for yet another world-view, a global humanitarian approach to counter the war, riots and militancy-ridden political atmosphere of the present-day world.²⁹

Ila’s desire for freedom is born out of the desire to escape the stifling hypocrisy, moral policing and cultural regimentation that is a part of the new Indian nation-state. Grandmother, for instance, is a symptomatic representative of that order of things. In her denunciation of Ila, born out of a “contempt for a freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket,” as the narrator puts it, she says :

It's not freedom she wants,...She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases : that's all that any whore would want. She'll find it easily enough over there; that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free. (p. 89).

This argument of, course, is a confusion of several positions. To equate Ila's 'air ticket' freedom with national freedom has the much desired result, for a nationalist like the grandmother, who at one time would have even killed for her freedom, of falsely conflating two differing value schemes - 'money' and 'freedom'. By doing so, grandmother can clearly show how a freedom won through, to echo another great nationalist, "blood, toil, tears and sweat", is supremely important than a flight ticket. Ironically enough, this is also a strange sort of statement to come from a well-entrenched bourgeois gentlewoman, who is ready to fly across to Dhaka to free an old man and yet at the same time, hardly willing to extend a helping hand to that same man's grandson and daughter-in-law who are living in a penurious state in her own city. Paradoxically, even the understanding narrator falls for her position. And though he has witnessed Robi's hypocritical attitude in not allowing her to dance, and knows that Ila does not live only for herself because she takes part in radical plays for asians, anti-racist demonstrations, and what is more works for a relief agency, he succumbs to the freedom sermon delivered by grandmother. Curiously, his position has the echoes of a perfectly placid, at-home-with-everything attitude towards freedom. That seems necessary ideologically, after having shown the two women advocates of freedom putting their cases forward in an aggressively rabid manner. Note how, after the grandmother's just given her speech with "bloodshot eyes glowing in the hollows of her withered face" and

the narrator's contemplated Ila's face "wet with tears, twisted with anger and hatred," the narrator's voice strikes just the perfect note with its calm, poise, balance of views and even the right kind of self-doubt :

...and I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound : whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me. (p. 89).

Robi's perception of freedom is, more or less, the most ambivalent in the novel. Freedom for him, at a very personal level, is a release from the horrifying memory of Tridib's death. A personal favourite of the grandmother, he reproduces in his person, some of grandmother's attitudes. And to that extent, he duplicates not just her authoritarian habits but indirectly even those set modes of thought and unquestioning acceptance of rules that would mark him out as the perfect citizen of the state. The narrator makes a telling observation about his nature, when he says:

...his authority grew out of that subterranean realm of judgement which we call Morality, the condition of whose success is that its rulings be always shrouded from argument. (p. 83).

Freedom then, for Robi, is operating within the dictated parameters of the state. His experience as an I.A.S. officer, however, brings him face-to-face with the fact that freedom may not be enjoyed in the same measure by every citizen of the state. Accordingly, just as the Indian nation-state was formed out of a struggle for freedom, he realises, several unhappy citizens may be trying to reproduce that same gesture by fighting for their local nationalities. These, of course, are clubbed together as 'terrorists',

'separatists', 'extremists', 'militants' or 'insurgents', not 'nationalists' by the state. The force and absurdity of the nation-state and more particularly, nationalism, is brought home to him. However, all that does not lead him to a position where he can contest the kind of freedom the state confers upon its citizens. Instead, as the following quotation shows, he only develops an extreme skepticism of the notion of freedom :

...why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? what would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. (p. 247).

This of course, is twisting a whole complex debate in a simple way. A just equitable atmosphere of freedom is always a desirability for a nation-state. But then, that may never be realised. And that may be Robi's mirage but not freedom. Robi also conflates personal psychological freedom with state-sanctioned freedom. Curiously, this position only reaffirms the narrator's position discussed earlier. Moved surely by Robi's rhetoric, the narrator ironically remarks :

We stood a long time like that, on the steps of that derelict church in Clapham, three children of a *free state*, together clinging. (p. 247). (italics original)

And this comes just after Robi's speech.

In his *Lineages of the present*, Aijaz Ahmad talking about the attractions of the nation and nationalism provides the following outlook:

...the category of the nation is attractive for the intermediate classes also

because of its predilection to suppress the class question and to pose the question of liberation on the level of 'the people' or even on the level of the 'classless' state. It is precisely because of its supra-class appearance and its immense mobilising power that the ideology of nationalism becomes the classic terrain for the construction of hegemony, on the part of any class which seeks to lead the other classes of civil society.³⁰

(emphasis original)

To the extent that *The Shadow Lines* exposes the false nature of the categories like nation and nationalism, it can be suggested that it may have escaped the ideological pulls of the nation-state. However, that critique is not without its problematic vide Ahmad's position. For it is an individualism very much grounded in its class location, that informs the problematising of the nation-state idea. Though the text privileges a consistent and radical critique of all structures - both state sponsored or not, through the figure of the individual, its achievements are largely driven by the motive of securing the maximum possible concessions for the individual. This is not to suggest that larger social realities are totally ignored by the text. These are important but to drive home border realities and such things as 'we may be different but we are basically one'. For at the end of the day, Tridib and the narrator may descend upon the hopeless and the unemployed at the Gole Park *adda* and address the crowd not on the employment policies of the government but on such things as the food habits of arboreal apes and the plays of Garcia Lorca. This stance is best described as liberal individualism with a post-modern tinge. For there is a good deal of talk about genuinely desiring the 'other', and about a relocation of individual struggle and protest chiefly along individual lines and that too through a change in set

mental habits - imagination, memory, freedom (the pure psychological components of these) and reality (as psychologically understood). Appropriately then, keeping in tune with this kind of a rhythm, any effective politics is not only ruled out but systematically debunked. Thus, such unabashedly postmodern perspectives (A.N.Kaul calls them “postmodern banalities”³¹) as the following are invoked to decry any call to action :

Tridib laughs and shakes me by the neck and tells me not to shout at her. Everyone lives in a story, he says, my grandmother, my father, *his* father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names I hadn't heard of; they all lived in stories, because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose...(p. 182). (italics original)

Moreover, Ila's politics are suspect, because the political culture of which she is a part dubs her “our own upper-class Asian Marxist.” (p. 97). Besides she is largely peripheral to that set-up and according to the narrator, deluded in believing, along with her friends, in the idea “that their lives and ideas might have some influence on another continent.” (p. 97). This for the narrator is mainly a kind of compensatory belief meant to cover up for “their impotence at home.” (p. 98). It is important to notice here the narrator's criticism of Ila as stemming from the ‘peripheral’ role that she is playing. For it comes up even when he sees May collecting money for relief work. He finds it strange that May should - poster under her arm, collection box in her hand, stand in crowded streets for hours, when she could be “deciding where the helicopters go and things like that...” (p. 163). Coming, as he does, from a family that has taught him the craft of clinging to gentility, of valuing hierarchisation especially in job matters, politics if pursued from a peripheral position is perhaps no politics at all. All this however is never

made evident. But there is a lot of talk about 'real', 'serious' politics like that of Alan Treasawsen's - Nick's maternal uncle, and that of his bunch of friends or that the narrator himself has been witness to in the 60's and 70's in India :

But still I had known people of my own age, who had survived the Great Terror in the Calcutta of the 'sixties and 'seventies, and I thought I had at least a spectator's knowledge of their courage, something that Ila, with her *fine clothes and manicured hands*, would never understand. (p. 105).

(italics mine)

Notice how the 'clothes' and 'manicured hands' are carefully inserted to create just the right jarring note. Gender itself, it is covertly suggested here, may be problematic for any effective politics. And Ila and grandmother are presented almost as if to attest the undesirability and unattainability of any progressive feminist individualism. Noting these contradictions over gender issues, Suvir Kaul says :

...Ila also functions as a narrative scapegoat, a figure who acts as a lightning-rod for a great many sexual and cultural anxieties, and the telling of whose unhappy and even sordid itinerary - especially her relationship with Nick - takes on all the cautionary tones of a modern fable.³²

Her "inelegant transgressions,"³³ as he later puts it, are meant to highlight the failure of her kind of individualism and also serves as a contrast to the main two male individualists - Tridib and the narrator. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan finds these "passive" in that they are "primarily observers of events rather than participants. This gives them a quality of detachment, even aloofness, from human conflict and passions (which is not the same, however, as indifference)."³⁴ The contrast then between the "passive" males - the

narrator, and his guide Tridib and the “active” women characters serves to accentuate the novel’s ambivalent political stance. To quote Rajan again :

In a novel that places value chiefly on the search for individual perfectibility, collective activity would not constitute fulfillment.³⁵

Accordingly the two women, both deluded by some collective idealism fail to achieve any perfect individualism (read ‘male individualism’) and their sympathetic energies for others is simply shortcircuited by their illusions.

Ghosh’s text also celebrates a kind of liberal individualism which is suspect just because it indulges in a romantic glossing of differences. Thus about the idea, put forward in various ways by the narrator and Tridib, that the world and it’s people are essentially the same, A.N.Kaul remarks :

That humanity, after all, is the same everywhere may be true, but it will seem a bitter, mocking truth to that mass of mankind whose lives are riven everywhere by the operation of such divisive forces as racism, imperialism and class exploitation.³⁶

This romantic attitude persists even when the narrator deconstructs the very foundations of nationalism. For there is no effort to formulate anything beyond that. To quote A.N.Kaul once again:

...if we were to grant that nationalism is no longer a positive historical force, should this not lead us immediately to ask what kinds of globalism are likely to supplant it and with what implications for freedom and culture?³⁷

That however is not the responsibility of the text, committed that it is, to the project of

finding the meaning of freedom and what not, only at level of the individual and perhaps, if a liberal humanist strand were to be read into that project, only for a similar set of individuals. Thus a critique of certain structures of power is limited to issues of personal, individual emancipation. The social ramifications of that contestation are never explored. Thus larger socio-political realities are evaded in the move towards realising an individual-centred basis of liberty.

To conclude, it may be said that *The Shadow Lines* enunciates a very radical critique of the nation-state mechanism by contesting and challenging it's rationale for the liberal individual. However, through it's various vacillations and ambivalences on just those very issues which are crucial for it's critique, it damages it's grandly undertaken project seriously. Also, though the text introduces perceptive changes in all the inevitable precepts or characteristics of the nation-state as commonly understood, by problematising them in the context of the individual, it manages to maintain the status-quo. Those characteristics of the nation-state which were listed in the opening sections of this chapter are unsettled when they are viewed from the liberal individualist perspective. But that unsettling only amounts to a kind of shadow boxing. For at the end what remains vague and undefined are not the borderlines but the very program that has been undertaken for the cause of the individual. Moreover, there is no clear demarcation between a politically liberal and progressive individualism and a romantically deluded bourgeois individualism. Thus, an effective political critique is simultaneously mixed with a spurious kind of interrogation which eventually takes the bite out of that critique. This, it must be noted, is in keeping with the shadow line ideology of the novel.

END NOTES

- ¹ O. P. Gauba, *An Introduction to Political Theory* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1981) 55.
- ² For an interesting range of political perspectives - from liberalist to marxist, on the state, see O. P. Gauba, op. cit., 113-149 and especially, David Held, *Political Theory and the Modern State: Essays on State, Power and Democracy* (Delhi: Maya Polity, 1998) 11-55.
- ³ For a long list of definitions, compiled from the writings of all sorts of political scientists and theorists from Aristotle to Barker, see N. D. Arora and S. S. Awasthy, *Political Theory* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1996) 88-90.
- ⁴ Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 77-78.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁶ R. M. MacIver and C. H. Page, *Society: An Introductory Analysis* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1974) 456.
- ⁷ R. M. MacIver, *The Modern State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926) 10.
- ⁸ Harold J. Laski, *A Grammar of Politics*, 4th ed. (1925; London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1938) 23.
- ⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) 1.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, 4.
- ¹¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985) 219.
- ¹² *ibid.*, 120.
- ¹³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995) 20.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 24.
- ¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) 24.
- ¹⁶ Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1996) 70.
- ¹⁷ See Sudipta Kaviraj, "Crisis of the Nation-State in India," in *Contemporary Crisis of the Nation-State?* ed. John Dunn (London: Blackwell, 1995) 115-119.
- ¹⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, op. cit., 44.
- ¹⁹ I have in mind here a certain structural polarity. Though this is not to suggest that the two women occupy two antipodal positions and that the narrator is located in some zone of balanced ambivalence between the two. However, the general depiction of the women almost always borders on 'extremes' and therefore, the above-mentioned structural logic may be partially true.
- ²⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational ed. (1988; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 20. All further references to the text are indicated by page numbers in parenthesis.
- ²¹ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*," in Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational ed. (1988; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 289.
- ²² Michael Billig, op. cit., 22.
- ²³ Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety : Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*," in Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational ed. (1988; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 269.
- ²⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Maps and Mirrors : Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*," in Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational ed. (1988; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 262.
- ²⁵ Ernest Gellner, op. cit., 56.
- ²⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986) 7.
- ²⁷ Sharmila Guha Majumadar, "The Shadow Lines and *In an Antique Land* : Some Thematic Considerations," in *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, ed. R. K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999) 180.
- ²⁸ See Seema Bhaduri, "Of Shadows, Lines and Freedom : A Historical Reading of *The Shadow Lines*," in *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, ed. R. K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999) 105-113.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, 106.
- ³⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, op. cit., 68.
- ³¹ A. N. Kaul, "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*," in Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational ed. (1988; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 308.
- ³² Suvir Kaul, op. cit., 273-74.
- ³³ *ibid.*, 285.
- ³⁴ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, op. cit., 291.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*
- ³⁶ A. N. Kaul, op. cit., 301.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 302.

CHAPTER - III

OF INDIVIDUAL DREAMS AND SOCIAL NIGHTMARES: SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALISM IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an extensive reading of the individual-social dialectic from the point of view of the individual. Through its dissection of a Kerala society inhabited by Syrian Christians, Hindus and untouchables, it programmatically debunks several regressive structures of thought and feeling. The critique, however, is not just limited to a thorough probing of certain well entrenched-orthodoxies. Even an emancipatory movement such as the Marxist movement in Kerala is seen as offering no scope for individual fulfillment and enhancement. This chapter looks at the ways and means with which Roy enunciates and conducts her tirade against every fabric of social existence from family life to community living to social upliftment movements. It will point out how Roy's critique functions in terms of a romantic conception of the individual that valorises the individual over the social networks of being. To that extent it will also be illustrated as to how Roy evokes and continually enlists a 'nature'-'culture' opposition to fuel her deconstructive project. This chapter then, proceeds by first looking at the individual-society relation as construed in sociology, and then tracing the ramifications of that debate in the Indian context. That is followed by a documentation of the various ways in which Roy exposes the hypocritical nature of society and its vice like grip on the individual. Finally, an examination of Roy's approach is attempted by locating it in a postmodern context.

It is not possible to attempt even a rough sketch of the very many ideas about a concept called 'society' and the relation of the individual with that basic social unit,

considering the myriad ways in which the two units have been defined and understood. Yet some preliminary ideas or notions may be taken stock of, if only to relate them to a reading of the text later on. Accordingly, a society may be conceptualised as a collection of individuals, an organisation, howsoever informal or formal, a set of interactions, or a matrix of relationships. These concepts may generally be seen as either belonging to a functionalist interpretation or a structuralist interpretation of society. For those who look at society in terms of functions ascribe it a particular purpose like that of the advancement or betterment - economic, political or social, of the individual. While those who read a certain structure into society, do so by pointing out certain characteristic features like institutions, traditions that are a part and parcel of every society and even those mental habits and cultural norms that go into the making of any society.¹ For a text that looks at society as a combination of rigid, orthodox, hierarchical structures maintained and perpetuated for reasons ranging from self aggrandisement to domination and control, somehow both groups of views on society may be found relevant. Further, apart from the points already mentioned, the fact that societies are to a large extent based on ideas of likeness and difference, may be stated. For according to MacIver "society means likeness."² This however does not suggest that societies do not have differences intrinsic to them. They do exist but they are subordinated to the likenesses. After all, societies are bounded units and their boundedness lies in curtailing differences to manageable proportions.

Generally, the many theories that take stock of the individual-society relationship, fall into two separate camps - the organicists and the contractualists. The contract theory made popular by the likes of Thomas Hobbes and Rousseau stresses the contract nature

of society.³ This is to say that society is an artificial construct created by individuals for their personal and common ends. Clearly in this conceptualisation of society, the individual precedes the society. For the organicists, on the contrary, the society may be likened to an organism. It is therefore something natural.⁴ Needless to say, both camps accord primacy to any one mode of the relationship at the cost of the other. For as MacIver and Page point out, the organicist view “fails to do justice to the individuality of the social being, just as the contract theory fails to do justice to his social nature.”⁵ Individuals and societies then may be seen as indispensable for each other for one way of understanding them is to look at them in terms of a relationship. Thus taking into account the fact that individuals cannot be individuals if they grow in a feral⁶ manner and that their very idea of the self is founded in society, it may be said that individuality is a function of society just as society is a collection of individualities and is formed and maintained by the various networks or inter-relationships between individuals. Hence, any description that seeks to probe the individual-society linkage must treat society as a system of linkages in which various individuals participate in multitudinous ways. It would be therefore a partial truth to claim that individuals are completely and totally determined by society. For individuality confers on the individual a certain independence in terms of judgement, expression and decision-making. An individual is not an automaton, subservient to custom and habit but possesses some basic self-understanding and knowledge of personal purpose. As will be illustrated later, Roy’s text contains ample documentation of the various struggles against the denial of individuality to individuals by society.

An area of concern for any study of individuals in society is the various processes

of social integration. For individuals are never really cent percent members of a society. This only suggests that integration is never complete, nor harmonious. At many levels, individuals resist the regulation, interference and institutional impositions of society. Therefore while at the societal level, individuals are controlled either by force or coercion or motivated to join a grand standardisation process, at the individual level, contrary to societal pulls and pushes, a logic of subversion and resistance functions. What follows from this tension is individual co-operation and conflict. Even here many subtleties operate. For co-operation and conflict, for that matter, may be direct, indirect, partial and even perhaps total. A related dimension to the issue of co-operation and containment, euphemistically perhaps called 'integration', wherein increased conflict and co-operation levels come into crucial play, is the set of strictures that may be brought under an umbrella term called "social code". In society, various codes work to incorporate individuals. Their tasks range from indoctrination to habituation. It is important here to make a distinction between 'custom' and 'habit'. Habits normally, may be termed an individual phenomenon whereas custom may be called a social event.⁷ Thus custom is something external in that it is socially sanctioned. The societal codes invade the personal domain to customise habits just as habits through their widespreadness enter the public domain and don the garb of socially approved custom. Those habits which are especially vulnerable to customisation are those relating to sex, morality and religion. And since these are perceived as potential disrupters of the social codes, they are policed and controlled in an extreme manner.

All this automatically leads to the issue about how individuals confront socially legislated norms and mores. In other words, keeping in mind the various codes, an

individual has to choose from, how can the encounter between individuals and social codes sketched? Now codes themselves, are not mutually compatible. In fact, they may even be contradictory to each other. The individual then, has to make choices from not just a mutually antagonistic set of codes but even a personally disliked set of options. Moreover, given the power structures that operate, in any given society, at any point in time, the individual has to withstand pressures to comply from dominant groups - these are the power seekers or power wielders, authority - the entire hierarchy and institutions - the orthodox traditions or codes that became well-entrenched in society, over a period of time. The individual's task, thus is not easy, and conflict is inevitable. It is believed that even social utopias may not be completely conflict free. And this only goes to show what conflicts are like in modern day societies. However, as said earlier, given the pressures to be determined by forces larger than himself or herself, the individual is not completely at a loss when it comes to salvaging some level of independence or freedom or better still, some kind of individuality. And this is generally done by following an individual code gleaned from the various codes thrust upon the individual. It is subversive in that it may not be totally subscribing to the codes that be. Through a series of adjustments, the individual manages to conform to the social diktats.

Indian rural societies are a mesh of many codes. But of the many, the caste code may be said to occupy an overarching and dominating code position. It informs, to say the least, not just gender relations or modes of occupation, conduct, house architecture but a whole gamut of activities from manner of talking to ways of behaving.⁸ Generally, any member of a particular caste acquires caste status by being born in it. However improved political and economic status may alter that principle at times.⁹ Moreover, caste

maintains its distinct status, by exercising the principle of exclusion or separation, hierarchy and interdependence.¹⁰ Exclusion or separation is practiced through marriage and rules of contact, hierarchy through the conferring of rank and status, thus maintaining order, and interdependence by the division of labour. These separate principles, moreover, operate according to Leela Dube, “not so much through individuals as through units based on kinship.”¹¹ Within these largely rigid grids of control, regulation and domination, individuals both within and outside the system may be easily exploited and suppressed. For individuals are tied to the family or household in kinship. Accordingly, it may be suggested that those who already occupy weaker positions in the household may be in for more suppression via the caste codes. Gender then becomes a vital issue in the caste-ridden society because of already-existing patriarchal relations. Thus caste strictures regarding the observance of endogamy within caste members may be directly interpreted as a mode of controlling women. Besides, since caste overwhelmingly believes in notion of purity and pollution, “a woman’s role in biological reproduction...makes her primarily responsible for maintaining the purity of caste and its boundaries and calls for proper control of her sexuality.”¹² An another important feature of the inequitable man-woman relationship in society, compounded by caste realities, is the unequal distribution of rights or entitlements to material resources. Hence, along with the management of her sexuality, induced of course by caste society’s belief in her vulnerability, and its desire to maintain purity, a woman has to put up with the deprivation of certain basic economic rights. All this leads to the conclusion that caste in rural societies, is the central determiner of women’s lives. To quote Leela Dube again :

caste is not dead. Gender is a live issue. The principles of caste inform the

specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender.¹³

The Syrian Christians of Kerala, more popularly known as “caste Christians”, claim descent from a group of high caste Hindus, who had converted to Christianity sometime around 52 A.D., with the arrival of St. Thomas, an apostle of Christ. While this history is not monolithic in itself, and is vulnerable to contending claims by various groups, it has been maintained that caste consciousness is an inalienable feature of Syrian Christian society.¹⁴ This paradox where a feudal Hindu outlook rubs shoulders with a religion that supposedly purports egalitarianism for all its adherents, may be taken as a tribute to the resilience of the caste system or the ineffectivity of Christian ideology. Whatever may be the reason, class considerations or socio-economic status has also greatly exacerbated the situation. According to Tharamangalam :

Restrictions on commensality and other forms of social intercourse appear to be the sharpest where the distance between the groups in terms of socio-economic status and power is also the sharpest. Inter-caste relations between Christians and are embedded in an ensemble of economic, social and political relations.¹⁵

Fuller also subscribes to the same notion when he says that :

Christians and Hindus, for the most part, share an ideology of caste and that in this ideology, in contradiction to Hindu theology, politico-economic power is not absolutely separated from religious status.¹⁶

This has resulted in an “ ideological synthesis” with the concomitant effect of, as Fuller argues, Christians and Hindus becoming “members of one total caste system, not two

separate ones existing side-by-side.”¹⁷ Interestingly, whereas Christian doctrines stress the ‘individual’, Hindu systems of thought while not entirely devaluing the role of the ‘individual’ emphasise as opposed to the group the “normative subject”.¹⁸ For a caste-informed Christian society, this has many ramifications. However, considering the unjust status of women even in Syrian Christian societies, it is unlikely that an equal individuality may be practised by men and women belonging to such communities. To that extent, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, with its preoccupation with freedom, liberty and justice for women in a Syrian Christian society, may be seen as partially examining and furthering that debate.

If there are any issues which inform Roy’s grand project of criticising and exposing the emptiness and eloquent silences of a Syrian Christian family steeped in orthodoxy, feudalism and patriarchy, then it is those that concern a divorced Syrian Christian woman - Ammu, her dizygotic twins - Estha and Rahel and her untouchable lover - Velutha. Set in Ayemenem, a small town in the Kottayam district of Kerala, Roy’s story unfolds as a horror tale against a background drenched in the most romantic of associations. The horror bit is of course accentuated when seen in juxtaposition with the lush, verdant and idyllic countryside. At least that is the impression which is systematically and persistently maintained till the end of the novel. Ranga Rao catches this mood of the novel when he says:

...it is all about atrocities against minorities, Small things: children and youth, women, and untouchables.¹⁹

To be fair to the novel, protest is a defining note in the text. But floating along with it is also a lot of skepticism. For Roy doesn’t stop with a graphic description of how Ammu,

the kids and Velutha are callously and cruelly destroyed but also goes on to paint a dreary picture of family life and community politics - to be specific, the Marxist politics in Kerala. Added to that is also an attack on the crass commercialism that has become a feature of cultural art forms and the ecological destruction that has come in the wake of vested political interests and capitalism.

To begin with, from the various structures of containment, the family unit may be considered, as Roy singles it out for her most scathing comments. As explained and suggested in the preceding sections, Roy's actual exasperation with the family revolves around the status of Ammu and therefore women in a feudal, patriarchal household. Ammu, as a young girl had been deprived of an education because her father had "insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl. " (p. 38).²⁰ Moreover, unable to raise enough money for a suitable dowry, Pappachi - her father, could not marry her off. This had only increased her desperation to escape. She got her chance and ended up marrying a Bengali - an assistant manager of a tea-estate in Assam. That however, proved to be a disaster. He had turned out to be an alcoholic and just before their marriage had ended, had asked Ammu to perform sexual favours for his English superior in a bid to save his sagging career. Not at all a novice to violence from childhood, Ammu had even put up with his battering and badgering, but had to leave when the children began to be victimised. Eventually, she had "returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams. " (p. 42). For Ammu then, life had come full circle with an exhaustion of all probable possibilities. Her return only signalled the death of choice. Moreover, for her the choices that were available to

women were themselves determined by a patriarchal order and so they weren't meant to offer freedom at all. In her instructions to her children therefore, she lets them know that "choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice." (p. 37).

The women of Ammu's household viz. Mammachi - her mother and Baby Kochamma - her father's sister, as women custodians of caste have always been, continued to hold on to caste banners without the least solidarity for Ammu and her children. Mammachi, ironically enough, had been a life-long victim of her husband's battering. Her reticent and passive acceptance of such a fate had only signified the worst kind of acquiescence for Ammu:

...human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to. You only had to look around you, ...to see that beatings with brass vases were the least of them. (p. 50)

Baby Kochamma had developed a strong liking for a young Irish priest called Mulligan, when she was a teenager. Her love was never reciprocated even when in a bid to secure his love for her, she had changed faiths and become a nun for some time. Her world, though it had once permitted certain transgressive feelings in matters of love, had turned gradually into a moral orthodoxy. Naturally then, she wanted everybody to adhere to it. Ammu's return was the least welcomed by her. For in her scheme of things she knew perfectly, which woman belonged where:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter - according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And

as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage - Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (pp. 45-46) (italics original)

Going back to what has been said earlier about the individual's relation to society and the special nature of caste society in Kerala, it may be observed, considering the brief description of the women characters above, that social codes even when they are inimical to individuals, find strange forms of sustenance from them. Mammachi, incidentally had successfully managed to run a small pickling unit, while Baby Kochamma had in her youth even pursued a course in ornamental gardening from Rochester University. In other words both had breached the strict gender codes in substantial ways. While the former had found perhaps, some measure of economic freedom, the latter had been granted the right to pursue an education. And yet, they had ended up upholding the caste code. Not only that, they had even colluded in denying Ammu, what they themselves had so much desired. Given this schema of gender realities in the Ayemenem House, it may be suggested that no sense of commonality of purpose or communion of interests is shared by Ammu, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. Any effort therefore, to establish a common platform of issues is at best a vain attempt. Interestingly, while Roy never goes into the complex dynamics of the relationships that exist between the women, she doesn't lose time in reiterating the failed negative nature of the relationships that exist between the women of the house.

Chacko - the Oxford scholar, Ammu's brother is another big let down. Like his Syrian Christian predecessors, he knows he has a valid claim on the entire property and

loses no time to put that message across to Ammu. A self-proclaimed Marxist incidentally, he had cleverly donned a façade of equality to debauch the women workers of the factory. In Ammu's words, he was "an Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality - a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood." (p. 65). Coincidentally, like Ammu, Chacko too had married and divorced an English lady called Margaret after having fathered a girl child called Sophie. Surprisingly, broken marriages seem to be the scourge of the Ayemenem household. When the time for it comes, Rahel's marriage also ends in divorce. This structural repetition may be read as a trope that perhaps conveys Roy's poor faith in the family unit. Accordingly, it may be even read as an affirmation of individuality. For Ammu walks out of a marriage because she chooses to. Rahel following her footsteps was only too eager perhaps to divorce Larry McCaslin because she had "drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a *Sitting Down* sense." (p. 18). Chacko's marriage on the other hand, had been a failure because Margaret had fallen in love with someone else and had not the heart to put up with Chacko's shenanigans any more.

Religion too, like the family unit, comes in for its own share of criticism. In fact Roy's favourite metaphorical expression, her one-liner almost on christianity in Kerala, viz. "...Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag," (p. 33) is a deft comment on a religion that was dispersed widely but lost its original force as it succumbed to the casteist influences of Hindu society. Thus though salvation was proclaimed for all, not all could partake of the Lord's supper. Accordingly, Christianity in Ayemenem has degenerated into a set of empty rituals. Priests are 'donation friendly' and nuns find devious ways to stay close to priests. Rahel, who is sent to Nazareth convent,

discovers that in a "Christian institution , breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist and if they didn't could they hurt?" (p. 16). It is here, moreover, that she is branded a depraved person for decorating a cake of cow dung with flowers. But christianity for Roy is not just wrong in its external trappings. There is an overhauling of the central figure of Christ too, especially when the children come to Velutha's hut and find his brother, paralysed Kuttappen waiting for his death.²¹ There is a calendar behind him on the wall with a picture of Christ on it and this occasions a response from the narrator. Note how the narrator conveys her skepticism, apt enough perhaps, for a situation where no icons can have any meaning:

On the wall behind him there was a benign, mouse-haired calendar-Jesus with lipstick and rouge, and a lurid, jewelled heart glowing through his clothes. The bottom quarter of the calendar (the part with the dates on it) frilled out like a skirt. Jesus in a mini. Twelve layers of petticoats for the twelve months of the year. None had been torn out. (pp. 208-209).

This is followed soon after with a more sincere query, when the twins climb into the small boat they have brought into the hut and start rowing:

The twins climbed into the vallom and rowed across vast, choppy, waters.

With a *Thaiy thaiy thaka thaiy thaiy thome*.

And a jewelled Jesus watching.

He walked on water. Perhaps. But could he have *swum* on land?

In matching knickers and dark glasses? With his fountain in a Love-in-Tokyo? In pointy shoes and a puff? Would He have had the imagination? (p. 211).

(italics original)

Christianity then, in the text, gells in with the other quaint decadent institutions, to create a general ambience of corruption and decay. Since Roy does not posit a strong 'here after' or even a 'here before' to salvage some respect whatsoever for the faith, it is unlikely that in her scheme of things, she even faintly entertains the notion - Dumont's idea that Christianity as opposed to Hindu beliefs are more pro-individual. In one particular scene, in the novel, Rahel is shown killing a whole column of ants, who "were on their way to church. All dressed in red." (p. 185). This serves to underline the idea that, in the context of the story, Christianity is nothing but blind conformity and what Roy seems to be suggesting is that it can, in no way, be liberatory for the individual.

Through the experiences of the twins, Roy showcases in minute fashion, the various social processes of indoctrination and integration that come into operation from childhood onwards. Thus, the twins - Estha and Rahel, are constantly submitted to a barrage of do's and don'ts. Injunctions varied and extensive, are brought upon them from time to time. These may relate to matters like personal hygiene, dressing sense and even public etiquette. Baby Kochamma takes upon herself the task of hectoring them into learning English by giving them a lot of 'impositions' - a euphemism for punishments. The children are also invited to participate in the hypocritical life-style of the Ayemenem house. However, being unwanted and unloved, to a certain extent, they fiercely resist the pressures to conform. Even Ammu, for that matter, torn that she is between her motherly feelings, and her desire to show them off, if only to salvage some respect for them in the eyes of her mother, her aunt and Chacko's guests - Margaret and Sophie, succumbs to the prevailing hypocrisies of the house. Thus, when the children fail to perform before the

guests from England, the narrator explains Ammu's anger in the following manner:

She felt somehow humiliated by this public revolt in her area of jurisdiction. She had wanted a smooth performance. A prize for her children in the Indo-British behaviour competition. (p. 145)

The vulnerability of the children coupled with their search for respect and dignity draws them towards Velutha, the untouchable, who temporarily instils in them along with Ammu, a sense of individual worth. However, all that is shattered when Ammu's affair with Velutha goes public. In order to save the family honour, Mammachi and Baby give a false report to the police. Velutha is brutally beaten up before the twins and Estha is emotionally blackmailed into identifying Velutha as their kidnapper. Velutha's eventual death, the separation of the twins and Ammu's removal from the house brings to a close what might have been perhaps a successful attempt at achieving a balanced individuality in their lives. With their childhoods truncated, their only means of receiving some warmth and love extinguished, and their feelings of guilt unassuaged, Estha and Rahel grow up not as individuals with any design or purpose but as drifters hanging onto their private sorrows in some strange act of self-retribution. The two meet at the age of thirty one and temporarily find solace in an incestuous relationship.

The Marxist experiment in Kerala - introduced with the good intentions of removing class exploitation and alleviating the sufferings of the untouchables, finds mention in the text through Chacko's pseudo dalliance with it and Velutha's commitment to the movement courtesy his membership of the Communist Party of India. Apart from these two Marxists, there is Comrade Pillai - a highly dubious Marxist, whose machinations cost Velutha his life, the children - their childhoods and Ammu - her

everything. It is this fatal brush with Marxism that brings out Roy's assault on it and its representatives. The general ire against communist politics therefore, is justified through a depiction of the orthodoxy, the hypocrisy and the double-speak that have come to characterise the movement. But those genuine inconsistencies apart, it may be pointed out that Roy's highly skeptical perception of Marxism in Kerala has more to do with her general tirade against all those social units that destroy the individual than with any real knowledge of the intricacies of Marxist politics in the state. Aijaz Ahmad suggests as much when he says that Roy has "neither a *feel* for communist politics nor perhaps, rudimentary knowledge of it."²² (*italics original*). This statement of course, is made against a backdrop of charges accusing Roy of fabricating information about the Marxists in the state. The chief among these being the totally contrived and false claims that she makes about E. M. S. Namboodripad. However, that controversy notwithstanding, Roy's critical eye may be credited with observing the paradoxes and contradictions of an emancipatory movement gone awry due to caste realities and the selfish political ambitions of politicians like Comrade Pillai. Velutha, gullibly believing that the party would serve the interests of the individuals constituting it, is betrayed by his party just when he would have had the utmost need of it. When Velutha goes to Comrade Pillai for help, he is given a speech on the exact value of the individual within the party :

It is not in the party's interests to take up such matters.

Individuals' interest is subordinate to the organisation's interest.

Violating party discipline means violating party unity. (p. 287). (*italics original*)

The narrator's comment, a few lines later is telling:

And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature. (p. 287)

This then points a finger at Roy's real problem with Marxism. Hence, though it has been pointed out that the only Marxists in the novel are caricatures excepting Velutha i.e., and that the novel suggests that Marxism in Kerala has been engulfed by global tourism and capitalism, it may be shown that Roy's real interest lies in the interface between social movements and individuals or in this context, between Marxism and Individualism. Hence the implicit valuation of the naxal links that Velutha might have had or is rumoured to have. The idea is that the genuineness of the movement has shifted, courtesy the ideological betrayals of the Communist party, into the hands of a splinter group formed by members belonging to the party. This also has its romantic associations. For in contrast to the bureaucratic and organised, well-orchestrated movement for rights and reforms, the gun blazing trail towards revolution has a 'feral' quality to it.

For a novel that straddles not two but several continents of critique - global tourism, capitalism, ecological destruction (ecologism), feminism, marxism, crass commercialism, casteism, anglophilicisim, humanitarianism and individualism to name a few, there can be no appropriate designation but postmodernism, with a dash of romanticism, of course. This however, is not to suggest that Roy's politics in the text are overtly postmodern since the attacks on almost all the structures of society are mounted largely through the individual. Kalpana Wilson in a response to the accusation from Aijaz Ahmad, that the novel espouses a 'sublarn theory' ,comes to Roy's rescue by suggesting that :

...the fact that the novel focusses in on individual acts of resistance does not automatically imply...a fully-fledged 'subaltern' theory in which wider organised forms of resistance are rejected. On the contrary, organised resistance, class struggle and the possibility of it is an everpresent backdrop to the events of the novel.²³

Now it is difficult to mediate between these two positions because the novel does rope in a lot of subalterns - women, children and untouchables and it does have some ideal notion of politics, if only a little disorganised. But then metanarratives are certainly out and micro- narratives are in with a vengeance. This has more to do with the individual's uncomfortability with social set-ups than with any ideal movement or ideology going wrong in the realm of human experience. It has been noted, for instance, early on in this chapter, how the mood of protest in the text is constantly fuelled by an underlying skepticism. That protest in fact, may be taken as the net sum of all the individual frustrations that have occurred in the novel. It is the dominating individualism of the text. Besides, the skepticism or call it cynicism, prevents any kind of 'complex viewing' from taking place. Hence there are simply no redemptory 'other' narratives that may serve as a cushion to absorb the shock created by the fall of the metanarratives. Ayemenem becomes the proverbial testing lab for all experiments.

As suggested earlier, Roy's hypothesis of society vis-à-vis the individual is contractual. But then even that fails because society is a contract entered into by individuals who are definitely more equal than others. Velutha, the children and Ammu don't belong to it. Consequently, both the adults and the twins embrace a world away from the social only to be brought back to it broken and shattered. This retreat from the

social has been read in a variety of ways. Geeta Doctor in her review of the book, almost compares the children's world full of sights to a kind of childish regression:

The child's world that Roy creates...is what gives the story a sense of being suspended in a bubble that hangs in that perfect instant, which for a child means forever, a poignancy that we too feel, is unbearable. There is ...a yearning for a state where things really can be as uncomplicated as the warmth of childish lips pressed against a mother's fresh body, a communion of minds that has nothing to do with identity, or sex, or place, or history. A return to what the French called 'nostalgie de la boue', a desire for wallowing in primeval sludge, of which there is obviously plenty in Kerala.²⁴

Aijaz Ahmad, on the contrary, targets the adults' paradise away from home, by calling it a "phallogocentric utopia" where what takes place is:

...a privatisation of both pleasure and politics - a utopic moment of private transgression and pleasure so intense that it transcends all social conflicts of class, caste and race.²⁵

He further adds that:

...in its deep structure this discourse of pleasure is also profoundly political, precisely in the sense that in depicting the erotic as Truth it also dismisses the actually constituted field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith.²⁶

But then, this is very much in keeping with a nature-culture binary that underpins the whole novel. Consider for instance, the following description of Velutha- the 'native' son

of the soil:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (pp. 333-334).

It is easy to pick up the exoticisation that is taking place here. And this depiction does not, in any way, gell with the picture of Velutha thronging along with a huge number of protestors in a rally. What gives him his individuality then, is perhaps, his separateness from the masses, his location in a state of nature. Almost instantly, his Marxist indoctrination is played down and his personality, it is suggested, is in harmony with nature. Any kind of determinism - cultural, at least, that may explain Velutha's defiance, diffidence or sense of self-worth is done away with. There is also very little talk between the lovers for a picture of Velutha's ideological make-up to emerge. Interestingly, even Ammu, it is suggested by the narrator, has a feral nature that cannot be attributed to her cultural upbringing. Her views too, the narrator takes pains to inform are self-formed. For instance, after Ammu has snubbed Margaret for passing some supercilious, typically orientalist remark, the narrator in a bid to explain the surprise on everybody's faces, says:

Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think

the way she did.

She was just that sort of animal. (p. 180)

This urge to separate the two lovers from society, on behalf of the narrator, results in a loss of individuality for the two. Velutha's portrayal then almost borders on romantic stereotypes. Geeta Doctor echoes a similar sentiment, when she says:

Velutha, the black man, the untouchable, the Paravan, whose smell itself can contaminate, belongs to the romantic 'other' that has fuelled so much of the literature of conquest and domination and it is in this guise that he rises once more in Roy's erotic imagination.²⁷

Aijaz Ahmad also attests this stereotypification, when he says:

...in order to construct eroticism as that transcendence which takes individuals beyond history and society, straight into the real truth of their beings, Arundhati Roy in fact reduces the human complexity of the characters she herself has created and whom she wishes to affirm and even celebrate, albeit in the tragic mode.²⁸

Thus, when it comes to a description of the two individuals - Ammu and Velutha, the nature-culture binary limits Roy from providing a complex socio-historical perspective on their individualities. As a matter of fact, their encounter is rife with the most romantic glossing of issues. Their individualism then is seen as misplaced - a faint struggle against the forces before which they are helpless. In an interview given to Alix Wibur, Roy had maintained:

...my book is not about history but biology and transgression.²⁹

No wonder then that Roy skips history and focusses on biology and transgression in the

lives of Velutha and Ammu. It is as if that is all that is required to understand their lives. And if this is so, the very individualism that Roy seems to be championing becomes suspect. Caught between a non-committal politics and an individualised form of resistance, Roy's brand of individualism becomes that of an escapist variety. The deaths at the end of the love story also appear to testify to that idea. For the retreat into a state of bliss has only invited for the lovers a forgetting of many realities that lie outside of that space of encounter. It has also meant in some ways an abdication of social responsibility. That Roy's sympathies lie with the lovers is clear and to show that their little things are just as important as the big things, she has to embrace the tragic mode. The affirmation of the lovers, no doubt, even if temporary, can only be effective, if it is met with negation or better still annihilation. Other social modes of vindication simply do not exist. To quote Aijaz Ahmad, again:

...the decision to accept suffering and/or death is anchored in praxis, history, in social relationships chosen and lived in a complex interplay of necessities and freedom, fatal attractions can never cope with such complexities and must be acted out simply in terms of a libidinal drive. What we get, in other words, is a closed fatalistic world at the heart of individual choice: deaths foretold, as the obverse of phallic ecstasy.³⁰

This fatalism no doubt adds to the general air of skepticism. And Ammu's and Velutha's individual subversions, though committed against the backdrop of a pre-ordained world, are almost propped up forcefully to make a statement like 'small is beautiful if not powerful'. Interestingly in the run-on to the catastrophe, Roy employs a determinism that would perhaps shy the most rigid Marxist determinists. However, the

snuffing out of all hopes or alternatives is not a fresh technique that Roy applies to the domain of love. As has been pointed out, every social structure, movement or institution that is described in the novel does not have any inconsistency even in its corruption! Everything is consistently and totally bad. Love is the only refuge apart from nature that is posited as an antipode to the corrupt social culture. Towards the end of the novel then, Rahel's and Etha's incestuous encounter is presented as subversive, an antidote for the two whom the social has destroyed. But this scene is not without its ambivalence. As Amina Amin notes:

...through the gradual decay of the Ayemenem House which Roy reiterates piece by piece in chapter after chapter she also seems to suggest that an oppressive monolithic social system of which the Ayemenem house is an emblem and which offers no scope for individual autonomy or self fulfillment becomes the cause of its own degeneration. It would not be too far off the mark to suggest that the unnatural union of Estha and Rahel which at one level can be seen as an assertion of individual choice is at another level a sign of perversity.³¹

To conclude, Roy's *The God of Small Things*, through an examination of society, explores the relation between the individual and the social. By exposing the orthodoxies, hypocrisies and dangers of the various social structures, Roy comes out with a very strong statement in support of the individual. However that support is based on a very problematic notion of the society. And that informs Roy's brand of individualism too. Moreover, in perceiving individuals as severed from the social, in some contexts, Roy commits an ideological suicide. And though her critique is laboured and strong enough, it

loses its efficacy precisely because it is not mired in social realities. This is of course not to devalue her protest. For that is genuinely anchored in a praxis which renders the critique with some bite. But the solutions offered to the intractable, unsurmountable problems of society, makes the protest itself look misplaced and misdirected. And so for all practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world, walking a tightrope between private paradises and social hells becomes not an easy enough task to accomplish, especially with a romantic balancing pole.

END NOTES

¹ For structuralist appraisals of society, see Franklin H. Giddings, *Principles of Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1904) and Morris Ginsberg, *Studies in Sociology* (London: Methuen, 1932). The functionalists are best represented by R. T. Lapiere, *Sociology* (New York: McGraw, 1946) and R. M. MacIver, *Society: A Textbook of Sociology* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1945).

² R. M. MacIver, *The Elements of Social Science* (London: Methuen, 1956) 1.

³ See J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

⁴ Herbert Spencer was one of the important proponents of this position. For a pithy account of his evolutionary theory of society as put forward in the voluminous *Principles of Sociology* (3 vols.), see the chapter on Spencer in Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers from Plato to John Dewey* (New York: Macmillan, 1933) 351-400.

⁵ R. M. MacIver and Charles H. Page, *Society: An Introductory Analysis* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1974).

⁶ The word 'feral' meaning "wild", "animal-like" or "undomesticated", appears in the text a number of times. It is a word the twins have to practice writing properly in their "Wisdom Exercise Notebooks" and is specially used when Ammu gets her rebellious moods.

⁷ For an interesting discussion on the relation between 'custom' and 'habit', see R. M. MacIver and C. H. Page, op. cit., 189-196.

⁸ See M. N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996) for a host of issues connected with contemporary caste realities.

⁹ See Andre Beteille, "Caste, Class and Power," in Dipankar Gupta, ed., *Social Stratification* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) 339-352, for an interesting account of how caste equations in a rural village in Tamilnadu have changed courtesy changes in class and political power.

¹⁰ See Leela Dube, "Caste and Women," in M. N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996) 1-2.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 1.

¹² *ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ See Susan Viswanathan, *Syrian Christians of Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) for a recent study of the Jacobite community, a Syrian Christian group in Kerala. Also see J. Tharamangalam, "Caste Among Christians in India," in M. N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996) 236-291 and C. J. Fuller, "Kerala Christians and the Caste System," in Dipankar Gupta, ed., *Social Stratification* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) 195-212, for an account of

how the caste system paradoxically survives alongside an egalitarian Christian ideology.

¹⁵ Tharamangalam, J. in Srinivas, M.N., op.cit, p. 285.

¹⁶ C. J. Fuller, op. cit., 212.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 200.

¹⁸ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970) 9.

¹⁹ Ranga Rao, "The Book (er) of the Year," *The Hindu* 16 Nov. 1997 : xiii.

²⁰ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New Delhi: India Ink, 1997). All references to the text are indicated by page numbers in parenthesis.

²¹ For a reading quite contradictory to this one, see Suguna Ramanathan, "Where is Christ in the God of Small things?" in Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam, eds., *Explorations: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999) 63-68.

²² Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically," *Frontline* Aug. 1997 : 103-104.

²³ Kalpana Wilson, "Arundhati Roy and the Left: For reclaiming 'Small Things'," *Liberation* Jan. 1998 : 29.

²⁴ Geeta Doctor, "Avenging Angel," rev. of *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy, *Indian Review of Books* Apr. 1997: 5.

²⁵ Aijaz Ahmad, op. cit., 104.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Geeta Doctor, op. cit., 5.

²⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, op. cit., 105.

²⁹ Arundhati Roy, "When you have written a book you lay your weapons down," by Alix Wibur, *Frontline* Aug. 1997: 107.

³⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, op cit., 106.

³¹ Amina Amin, "Text and Countertext: Oppositional Discourse in *The God of Small Things*," in Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam, eds., *Explorations: Arundhati Roy's The God Of Small Things* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999) 28.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions are never meant to be conclusive and so this study can only attempt a temporary conclusion. Besides, since, this venture is primarily an '*ideologiekritik*', it can not claim transcendental status. The texts that have been read as part of a project to examine their ideology (after all, isn't individualism an ideology?) are sufficiently situated within the confines of postmodernism. And as part of the jargon of postmodernity, they do initiate a critique but fail to take a comprehensive position. This is because that resistance they erect is itself flawed, born as it is out of a misconceived set of dualisms between the categories of the individual and the social. Rushdie, for instance, manages some subaltern - speak in his revisionist historiography, but then the parodic takes over and cuts at the very resistance it (rushdie's history) might have been generating. In other words, the individual devotes his energies to himself to the extent that his ability to feel for others - his basic altruism is suspect. Ghosh takes up an entirely different task - criticise the nation-state. While this is dutifully taken up initially, it is abandoned at the altar of cross-cultural love. This shows what set of unstated assumptions - class-based i.e. informs his armchair crusade. Roy's trenchant castigation of Christianity, Marxism, patriarchy, feudalism, capitalism, tourism and the rest, all in one breath, leaves her spluttering for ideas. And moreover, when the world is so bad, painted that it is in the same colours, no possible scope for an imaginative communion with the social is left. The individual becomes a law unto herself and romantic isolation becomes a possibility, at least illusorily.

Ultimately, any ideological evaluation is bound to the terms of its discourse. That is its limitation, if not advantage. It would have been possible, for instance, to explore

Roy's language as a function of her individualist ideology and for that matter analyse the language registers of the Rushdie text for its break with - a highly individualised one i.e., other texts. These, however have not been possible since the focus has entirely been on the attitudes, ideas and the peripatetic nature of the individual narrators. Even a psychological examination of the conscious or unconscious structures of individualism would have yielded interesting results. These then are the blinkers that the study has put on. Though, of course, in my explorations of the texts, I have situated them within the larger discourses of history, sociology and political science. And that has proved interesting and challenging. The effort has been to show how texts can accommodate as well as challenge certain notions in say, history, sociology and political science.

Finally, to restate what has been said perhaps in many ways in this study, it has been shown how the texts studied align themselves with an individualism, which partly for purposes of specification and partly for reasons of ideology, has been named postmodern individualism. Since a belief in postmodern individualism, inevitably invites or entails a belief in many problematic aspects of the individual-social relationship, the various critiques that the authors considered initialize, get short circuited. They often fall victims to the illusions of postmodern individualism.

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